

Critical reflections on continental policy approaches to prevention of violent extremism and terrorism in Africa

Critical reflections on continental policy approaches to prevention of violent extremism and terrorism in Africa
Date | 28 February 2023
From presentation by Solomon Ayele Dersso at 'Le Grand Rendez-vous 2023 – PVE in West and Central Africa: Realities and Perspectives held in Dakar, Senegal on 28 February – 2 March 2023

I would like to start by thanking the organizers of this event for the kind invitation extended to Amani Africa to be part of this important and timely convening. I also would like to thank the earlier speakers for their edifying address.

Amani Africa is a pan-African policy research, training and consulting think tank that works on the promotion of effective policy responses to threats to peace and security in Africa through multilateral bodies on the continent, particularly the African Union (AU). The specific focus of our work on the role of African peace and security institutions, most notably the AU, means that the issue that is the subject of this conference has, over the course of the past several years, become a major area of preoccupation. We have produced analysis on the various peace support operations that are engaged in counter terrorism operations including those in West and Central Africa regions. We have also provided analysis on the AU Peace and Security Council meetings

focusing on terrorism.

It is against this background that we produced one of our major policy research works in May 2022 as critical input to the extraordinary summit of the AU held in Malabo, Equatorial Guinea on terrorism and violent extremism. Titled '[The growing threat of terrorism in Africa: A product of misdiagnosis and faulty policy response?](#)', this special research report serves as the basis for my remarks for this high-level panel.

Apart from the interest to inform the policy debate of the AU extraordinary summit on the issue, a major factor for this research work was the fact that the epicenter of terrorism shifted from other parts of the world to Africa. During the past decade terrorism has come to constitute the major threat to peace and security in Africa in two ways.

First, the frequency and fatality of the violence of conflicts involving terrorist groups have been on the rise on the continent. Civilians are bearing the brunt of much of these the violence mostly from terrorist attacks and from counter terrorism operations as well. By the counts of AU's Algiers based [African Centre on the study of terrorism](#), Africa witnessed a 400% and 237% rises in attacks and deaths respectively between 2012 and 2020.

This rise in the frequency and fatality of violence in conflicts involving terrorism is particularly the case in recent years in the Sahel and Central Africa regions, which are the focus of this conference. For the Sahel for example, the most current data shows that deadly violence has surged by 22 percent, with fatalities spiking by as much as 50% in 2022.

Second, geographically, the threat of terrorism was very limited, of not non-existent, in West and Central Africa regions until the late 2000s. When the AU Commission Chairperson produced the first report on the threat of

terrorism in Africa, for example, the threat was confined to pockets of East Africa and North Africa. During the past decade, the threat of terrorism spread across the five regions of the continent.

Today, West Africa and Central Africa have become main sites of conflicts involving terrorism. Demonstrating the continuing expansion of this threat, including emerging signs of terrorist activities in littoral states of West Africa, Ghana's President [warned](#) in a meeting last November that the 'worsening situation ...threatens to engulf the entire West Africa.' Indeed, incidents of attacks have already been reported in Benin, Cot d'Ivoire, and Togo.

What were the policy responses to the growing threat of terrorism and violent extremism in Africa?

As the AU Commission Chairperson noted in his address to the AU summit in Malabo last May, from Somalia to the Sahel, Lake Chad basin and Mozambique the AU and regional bodies deployed various military operations. According to our research report, analysis of the policy decisions of the AU both at the level of the AU Assembly and that of the PSC show that between 2010 and 2022, some **nine hard security instruments or initiatives** have been mobilized to deal with terrorism hotspots across the continent. This is without counting the various security initiatives of multilateral and bilateral partners of the AU and the regions.

As Amani Africa's report highlighted and the AUC Chairperson admitted, the threat of terrorism continues to grow despite the increase in the investment in and the use of these and other hard security tools including border control, intelligence exchange, and criminal justice measures. One explanation, AUC Chair highlighted in his address to the Malabo summit, is the lack of adequate support to make the use of these hard security instruments effective. Similarly, during his visit to West Africa, UN Secretary General said

that the 'operating in circumstances ... call not for a peacekeeping force, but a strong force to enforce peace and fight terrorism.'

Admittedly, as also recognized in our research report, there are indeed capacity gaps that limit the effectiveness of the hard security instruments used for countering terrorism on the continent. We agree that the use of hard security tools including military missions constitute essential component of any successful policy response to the threat of terrorism and they should be provided with the means to effectively execute their part of the responsibility.

One good example that demonstrates the importance of counter terrorism military operations is the experience of the AU Mission in Somalia. As my friend, the CEO and President of the International Crisis Group, Comfort Ero pointed out in her [address](#) to the Security Council last September, '[b]etween 2011 and 2012, and at great cost in Ugandan, Burundian, Kenyan and Somali partner forces' lives, the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) 'ended Al-Shabaab's formal control of Mogadishu and Kismayo, the country's second-largest city, prised swathes of territory out of militants' hands and provided much-needed security for two electoral cycles.'

Yet, the experience of AMISOM and the various other regional initiatives including the G5 Sahel and MNJTF in the Sahel and Central and West African regions as well as the Accra Initiative illustrate, the conventional policy responses put premium on the use of hard security institutions. Despite the increase in the use and multiplication of security heavy response mechanisms, the threat is not declining. If anything, it is further deteriorating. Accordingly, our report posed the question:

What are the problems with the conventional policy response to the threat of terrorism and violent extremism in Africa?

The research report revealed that the flaws in the conventional policy responses relate to both the diagnosis of and the policy response measures for countering the threat of terrorism in Africa. It highlights that, the dominant view about terrorism in Africa is based on a misdiagnosis of the nature of the problem.

According to Amani Africa's report, there are two aspects to the misdiagnosis. The first is that the conventional policy analysis considers groups identified as terrorists to be the core of the problem. Second, it also erroneously assumes that these groups are mainly ideologically driven by global jihad, a reading that is parachuted from experiences elsewhere in the world rather than being an accurate representation of the nature of such groups in Africa.

Contrary to these conventional views of the nature of terrorism, our report showed first that terrorist groups are the symptom of the main problem. Second, rather than being purely ideologically driven jihadist groups, they are complex socio-political entities that are embedded in and feed on local political, social and conflict dynamics.

Such misdiagnosis also led to faulty policy responses. Rather than focusing on approaches that address the underlying 'political and socio-economic pathologies', the conventional policy responses focused on 'eliminating' the symptoms of the problem. This is sought to be achieved by making hard security tools including military operations front and center of the response to the threat of violent extremism and terrorism.

They become both state security oriented and hard security based, hence too mechanical bereft of the fundamental political, social, cultural & economic tools the context demands. Echoing this, in his address to the UN Security Council on 15 December 2022 Kenya's Permanent Secretary for Foreign Affairs [Dr Korir Sing'oei](#) observed that '[t]oo much counter terrorism is too kinetic and narrowly technical.' In

the same vein Comfort also told the Security Council that 'it's rare – in fact, so far unheard of – that military operations alone can defeat movements that are quite deeply entrenched in parts of society, if not necessarily popular.'

Indeed, as even the relatively successful experience of AMISOM in Somalia, to which we made reference earlier, shows, military operation by itself alone is utterly inadequate. And it can never become a substitute to a political strategy that makes socio-political, governance, development and reconciliation measures, supported by military measures, the core of the policy response tools.

We thus call in Amani Africa's research report for a shift in both the diagnosis of and the policy response measures to the threat of terrorism. As the report put it, 'the political and socio-economic governance pathologies' and the grievances and vulnerabilities that these pathologies produce on the part of affected communities are the major conditions that precipitate the emergence and proliferation of terrorist groups. Experiences from the Sahel to Mozambique provide rich data to illustrate this.

The report thus advocates for a human security-based approach that brings to the centre of policy analysis and intervention

1. affected communities and
2. the resolution of their grievances, and the conflict dynamics of which terrorist groups are only a part.

What does this human security-based approach mean in practical terms?

Drawing some of the instructive experiences on the continent including, for example, the Lake Chad Basin stabilization strategy, first and foremost, this policy shift advocates for addressing the socio-economic, cultural and environmental needs of communities in territories that are vulnerable to

conflicts involving terrorist groups. As our report put it, this necessitates **a socio-economic and political program** that focuses on

- a. promoting respect for human rights, and the (re)building of **legitimate local** governance structures and capacities,
- b. the delivery of public services and social and economic provisions, and
- c. facilitate the provision of required humanitarian and livelihood support as well as other assistance and support as well as rehabilitation programs supported by regional security cooperation.

Additionally, this paradigm shift also necessitates the rebuilding of new state-society pact and public trust in the state and its governance institutions.

In terms of allocation of resources, this paradigm shift in the approach to the policy response to terrorism in Africa also necessitates that programming of counter-terrorism interventions should thus be reconfigured in a way that avails resources and capacity building support geared towards

1. building local capacities and governance structures for delivery of public services,
2. empowerment of local communities and marginalized members of such communities (youth, women, traditional or religious leaders and institutions)
3. strengthening of mechanisms for peaceful settlement of disputes among local communities, and
4. reforming of national structures of governance for promoting the inclusion of marginalized communities in national decision-making processes.

‘Such reconfiguration of counter- terrorism programming,’ our

report argued, 'has a higher chance of creating the social conditions that deprive terrorist groups of the grounds that make it easy for them to extract support from local communities.'

The other element that cannot be emphasized enough for the success of this recalibrated policy approach is the critical importance of nurturing and supporting courageous **national leadership**. Such is a leadership that has the political will, dexterity and imagination for acknowledging the existence of fragilities and the absence or fragility of state institutions in parts of the state and the accompanying complex challenges facing politically and geographically peripheral territories in those parts of the state, which terrorist or insurgent groups take advantage of.

As our report put it, the 'other element of this new policy approach, in terms of its conflict settlement and peacebuilding dimensions, is its recognition, and advocacy for active use of, the peacemaking instruments of negotiation and dialogue with members of terrorist groups as part of the peace and security tools available in conflict situations involving the presence of terrorist groups with strong local base.'

Explaining the importance of this, we stated that '[g]iven that the threat of terrorism in most part is primarily an outgrowth of governance and underdevelopment induced local conflict dynamics, the recognition of negotiation as part of the peace and security instruments necessary for conflict resolution in situations involving terrorist groups has the advantage of preventing current (hard security focused) policy options from condemning affected societies to perpetual conflict.'

Particularly instructive for the African context in this regard is the wisdom that Somalia's President in his article to [The Economist](#) shared that 'we must be realistic about how we bring about lasting peace and stability. It is simply too

dangerous to stick to the idea that military defeats alone will miraculously produce ready-made peace. ***Talks are needed, too.***

I thank you for your kind attention!

*The content of this article does not represent the views of
Amani Africa and reflect only the personal views of the
authors who contribute to 'Ideas Indaba'*