Fight against terrorism and violent extremism

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Tomorrow (23 February), the African Union (AU) Peace and Security Council (PSC) is expected to convene its 1202nd session to consider the report of the Chairperson of the AU Commission on the fight against terrorism and violent extremism.

Following opening remarks by Mohamed Arrouchi, Permanent Representative of the Kingdom of Morocco to the AU and Chairperson of the PSC for February 2024, Bankole Adeoye, Commissioner for Political Affairs, Peace and Security (PAPS) is expected to make a statement. Lallali Idriss Lakhdar, Acting Director of the Africa Centre for the Study and Research on Terrorism (ACSRT) is also expected to make a presentation.

The AU Commission Chairperson's report on the fight against terrorism and violent extremism was last considered by the PSC at its 1182nd session held on 27 October 2023. One of the concerning trends identified in this report was the alarming geographical spread of terrorism in the continent, particularly in the Sahel region and the growing risk of expansion to the coastal sates of west Africa. The latest report of the Chairperson to be considered by the PSC tomorrow is expected to demonstrate the continuing increase both in incidences and geographic spread of terrorism in Africa.

Heading into 2024, the threat of terrorism and violent extremism is predicted to remain one of the most pressing peace and security concerns the continent will continue to grapple with. By the end of 2023, ACSRT's database indicated

99% increase in the number of terrorist attacks and 53% in the number of terrorist related deaths noted in the period from January to December 2023, as compared to the previous year of 2022. The database further registered 8 terrorist attacks and 43 terrorism-related deaths per day, for the same period.

Aside from the geographic spread and growing prevalence of terrorist activities, what makes the threat even more concerning is the increasing complexity it involves associated with geo-politics, involvement of external actors and local dynamics of countries affected by terrorism. As may be observed in the Chairperson's report, there is a noted intersect between terrorist groups, some of whom are affiliated with global radical religious movements, and local militia groups engaged in armed conflict with member states. This intersection between terrorist groups and local conflict dynamics manifests in either one of two ways – a collaboration between terrorist groups and local militias, or contestations between the two actors for resources and control over territories. Needless to say, both of these dynamics entail serious challenges. In those cases where states, in their fight against terrorists, resort to the use of militias to effectively take advantage of their knowledge of local terrain and their understanding of cultural contexts, issues associated with human rights abuse and violations have also proven to become widespread.

Another important trend worth noting is the increasing shift in the perpetration of terrorist attacks, from civilians to military personnel and equipment. While civilians still continue to be the predominant primary victims of terrorist attacks in the continent, terrorist groups seem to be gradually demonstrating their capabilities to successfully orchestrate attacks against state security apparatus. According to data recorded by the ACSRT for the period from January to December 2023, 'out of 2,952 terrorist attacks, 1,597 were against civilian targets, 1,218 were against

military/security targets and installations, 89 were against International Organizations and deployments, and 48 were against Government Officials, Institutions, and Infrastructure'.

In terms of regional concentration of terrorist attacks and activities, the Sahel region continues to dominate, taking up 35% of the total attacks recorded in the course of 2023. Jihadist groups including Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM), Islamic State Sahel Province (ISSP), and Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) are the main terrorist sects that are currently active in this region. With Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, the three states in the region most affected by the scourge of terrorism, currently undergoing complex political transitions and faced with serious governance crisis, the conditions are tilted in favour of these terrorist groups to further intensify their insurgency and meet their objectives of expanding their operations into coastal west African countries. Amid withdrawal of the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) from Mali and the decision made by transition authorities of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger to withdraw from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) as well as the Group of Five for the Sahel (G5 Sahel) — opting to form the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) as an architecture of collective defence and mutual assistance mechanism — the region is experiencing major shifts and uncertainties that create a fertile environment for terrorist actors to strengthen their positions. This is further complicated by geopolitical contestations and involvement of foreign actors in the region.

The issue for the AU and the PSC in the face of such challenging dynamics is how to prioritize and enhance support and engagement in the effort to contain and ultimately overcome the terrorism menace in the central Sahelian states without being restrained by the post-coup complex transition that the countries are going through.

Following the Sahel, the Horn of Africa, Lake Chad basin and the Great Lakes Region respectively registered significant increase in violent incidents related to terrorist actors. In the Horn of Africa, one of the critical developments has been the strengthening of attacks by Al-Shabaab against military and security personnel. With the deadline for final withdrawal of the AU Transition Mission in Somalia (ATMIS) fast approaching and little indication of full readiness of the Federal Government of Somalia (FGS) to take on complete security responsibilities, the intensification of Al-Shabaab's activities as demonstrated through some of its more recent attacks against local administrations and protected locations in the capital city, Mogadishu, is definitely a worrying sign.

In the Lake Chad Basin, ISWAP and Boko Haram continue their insurgencies targeting particularly the north-eastern parts of Nigeria and the north of Cameroon. Trends of power struggle between these two main terrorist groups has been one of the concerning developments in the region which may interest the PSC to reflect on with an emphasis on the kind of impact such insurgent infighting will have on the already dire security situation.

The Great Lakes Region also continues to experience a spike in incidents associated with terrorist actors, mainly the Alliance Democratic Forces (ADF)/Islamic State Central Africa Province (ISCAP), which has allegiance to Daesh/ISIS. Majority of the terrorist attacks recorded in the region took place in the eastern parts of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) although Uganda also experienced some attacks. According to data registered by the ACSRT, DRC accounts for the majority of the total terrorism related civilian deaths in the continent and has the highest number of civilian casualties recorded in a single country.

In addition to these region-specific trends, the PSC may also take note of the emerging concern related to the use of technological advancements for terrorist activities. Terrorist

groups in the continent increasingly use technologic advancements in at least three ways. The first one of these is the use of new technologies such as cryptocurrencies to finance their activities in a manner that avoids the risk of being tracked by law enforcement. The use of cyberspace such as 'Dark Web' for conducting transactions including trade of drugs and weapons as well as human trafficking is another way through which terrorist groups make use of technology to fund their operations. The second use of technology for terrorist actors is the ease it creates for the dissemination of their ideology and propaganda. This enables recruitment of members and coordination of activities with speed and in an untraceable manner. Lastly, terrorist actors in the continent are increasingly using technologies such as AI and Drones for purposes of surveillance and spying. Further to infiltrating state positions, the use of Drones by terrorist groups for carrying out attacks is also an impending concern.

Despite the deployment of counter-terrorism efforts at the national and regional levels across the continent, the threat not only continues to persist but evidently intensifies over time. In addition to fortifying collaborations centred around the cross-boundary and transnational nature of the threat, it is also critical to re-examine the predominantly hard-security natured response deployed to eliminate the threat of terrorism in Africa.

In this respect, aside from receiving updates regarding counter-terrorism operations in the continent, the PSC may also reflect on bolstering the deployment and expanded use of non-military response approaches beyond the existing hard-security measures. It is expected that tomorrow's session in this respect would build on earlier sessions to put emphasis on support for expansion of local governance structures and delivery of basic public and social services, the provision of livelihood support and humanitarian assistance and the design and implementation of development programs tailored to the

conditions of areas affected by and are vulnerable to terrorist attacks. Not any less important is the use of negotiation and national reconciliation as vehicle for both facilitating the surrender and rehabilitation of fighters and achieving political settlement of the conflict dynamics that made the emergence of such groups possible.

The expected outcome of the session is a communiqué. The PSC is expected to express grave concern over the continuing increase in the spread of terrorism in the continent. Noting and commending the AU Commission and the ACSRT for the ongoing efforts to support member states in their counter-terrorism efforts including through capacity-building activities, the PSC may urge member states to allocate adequate resources for the development and implementation of strategies for counter-terrorism and prevention of violent extremism. Emphasising the major contribution of governance crisis to fuelling the threat of terrorism in Africa, the PSC may also call on member states to work towards addressing governance issues that serve as underlying root causes. The PSC may call on the ACSRT to work closely with the AUDA/NEPAD and the relevant development and infrastructure departments of the AU as well as the AU PCRD Centre for promoting the design and implementation of non-security interventions as critical measures for expanding state authority. It may also reiterate its endorsement of the use of negotiation and reconciliation processes as the means for the final settlement of conflicts involving terrorist groups. In this respect, the PSC may request the AU Commission to develop guidelines on the use of negotiations, reconciliation and mediation for settling conflicts involving terrorist groups drawing on avenues for such possibilities from countries affected by terrorism. Having regard to the transnational nature of terrorism, the PSC may further underscore the importance of enhanced collaboration and coordination between member states as well as with Regional Economic Communities and Regional Mechanisms (RECs/RMs), including through the deployment of joint operations. Taking

into account the growing use of technologies for supporting and perpetrating terrorist activities, the PSC may highlight the need for undertaking a study on the effect of technological advancements on the spread of terrorism and violent extremism in Africa.