



The Risk of Jihadist Contagion in West Africa

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What's new? Islamist militants' lengthening reach in the Sahel, particularly in Burkina Faso, is a growing concern for coastal West African states. These states' leaders fear that militants could use Burkina as a launching pad for operations further south.

Why does it matter? Militant attacks could threaten coastal states' stability. Some of these states have weak spots similar to those that jihadists have exploited in the Sahel, notably neglected peripheries that resent central authority. Several will hold what promise to be contentious elections in 2020, distracting leaders from tackling the threat.

What should be done? The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) is lobbying for joint military operations involving regional states. But intelligence sharing, border controls and efforts to win over local populations would be cheaper and more effective. ECOWAS should redouble efforts to avert electoral crises that militants could use to their advantage.

I. Overview

In West Africa, jihadist movements are spreading like the desert, from north to south. Their influence in Burkina Faso is a growing concern for West Africa's coastal states. Though these states have suffered very few attacks, their leaders fear that militants will use Burkina as a launching pad for operations further south. The sub-regional organisation, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), is lobbying for large-scale military operations in response. Yet such operations could prove a blunt instrument in a situation that requires surgical tools; they may aggravate tensions among ethnic groups in vulnerable areas. Instead, coastal states should adopt measures that are less expensive and likely to be more effective: better intelligence gathering and sharing, better border controls, targeted arrests and repaired relations with populations in neglected northern areas. ECOWAS should also take steps to minimise risks that elections in several coastal states do not provoke crises that would distract from efforts to rein in jihadists.

The spectre of jihadism reaching toward the Gulf of Guinea haunts West Africa. Islamist militancy's growth in an increasingly unstable Burkina Faso has greatly heightened this concern. Burkina occupies a critical position, linking the Sahel to coastal

states and bordering four of them: Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana and Togo. Burkina's history, society, economy and politics are interwoven with those of its southern neighbours. It could serve as an open door to the Gulf of Guinea. With militants sinking roots in Burkina, they would occupy an ideal position for moving south.

Jihadists themselves have repeatedly affirmed their intention to expand into coastal West Africa. True, their ability to do so in the immediate future is unclear: they have yet to carry out attacks in any coastal country's north and, in the south, they have struck only one, Côte d'Ivoire in March 2016. But militants often act more out of opportunism, exploiting turmoil, than sophisticated strategy. They could draw strength from coastal states' own fragility.

In that light, the weaknesses Gulf of Guinea countries display, which often mirror those of their northern neighbours, are all the more troubling. Though richer than the Sahelian states, they are plagued by the same underdevelopment of peripheries remote from the seat of power, popular disenchantment with absent or brutal state authorities, and shortcomings in intelligence and security services. Several Gulf of Guinea countries will hold what appear set to be contentious elections in 2020, meaning the threat of violent political infighting looms. Presidential polls in Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea and Togo could be particularly polarising and dangerous.

Another reason for the region's fragility lies in states' inability to work together. They have struggled to develop a united response to the jihadist threat. The creation of several different structures with overlapping security and development mandates has meant that efforts have been scattershot. ECOWAS is now attempting to coordinate, impose some order and mount joint military operations among its member states. But the subregional group lacks leadership and the billion dollars that joint operations require and that ECOWAS hopes will be supplied by West African states themselves appears unlikely to materialise, given the economic difficulties those states face.

There is a better and less costly option. Instead of stepping up military operations, coastal states should focus on sharing intelligence and strengthening border controls. They should make extra effort to regain the trust of local populations to slow down jihadist infiltration in their northern regions. Given the nature of the threat today, authorities in the region should focus on targeted missions based on reliable information, rather than large-scale operations that may result in the mistreatment of civilians, particularly among populations that are accused of being close to jihadists. Critical, too, is that ECOWAS and its foreign partners, notably the EU and France, step up diplomatic efforts to avert brewing electoral crises that could turn violent, threaten those countries' stability as much as jihadists do and create opportunities militants might exploit.

II. The Burkinabé Door

The Sahelian crisis has spread to Burkina Faso. Some jihadist groups appeared in northern Mali in 2012, and quickly spread to central Mali and the border between Mali and Niger. Since summer 2015, hundreds of attacks by jihadist and other armed groups, including self-defence militias, have occurred in Burkina Faso.

The spread of the Sahelian crisis into Burkina Faso may lead to violence on a regional scale, as it aids the progress of armed groups toward the coastal south. Geo-

graphically, Burkina Faso occupies a central position in West Africa. Sharing borders with Ghana, Côte d'Ivoire, Benin and Togo, the country sits at the junction of the Sahel and the Gulf of Guinea. Its relationship with its four southern neighbours is steeped in history, demography, economics and politics.¹ Burkina and the coastal countries also have religious ties: as in many coastal states, a significant proportion of Burkinabé are Christian or animist, something unique in the Sahel, where the overwhelming majority of the population professes the Muslim faith.² Burkina Faso therefore serves as an open door to the Gulf of Guinea.

By establishing themselves in Burkina Faso, jihadist groups can acquire a perfect launching pad for operations in the coastal south; they can benefit from the support of dense and longstanding community, religious, road, trade and criminal networks. For instance, Burkina Faso's numerous artisanal gold mines are a potential source of funding for armed jihadist groups. These mines' profitability is connected to coastal countries, because most of the gold is traded there. And from the supply sheds of these countries' artisanal and industrial gold mines, jihadist groups can obtain detonators for their home-made bombs.³

Since the beginning of 2019, most incidents occurring at the borders of coastal countries, and involving jihadist armed groups either directly or indirectly, have been linked to Burkina Faso. Two French tourists kidnapped in Benin on 1 May, likely by bandits who allegedly tried to sell them to jihadist groups, were freed a few days later in northern Burkina Faso.⁴ In late April, Togo's President Faure Gnassingbé announced the arrest of suspected members of armed groups coming from the country's neighbour to the north. That same month, Burkinabé intelligence services warned their colleagues in neighbouring states that several armed jihadists had left the country to take refuge in Benin and Ghana. A few days later, Benin launched the Djidjoho military operation on its border with Burkina Faso.⁵ Koury, a Malian town near the border with Burkina Faso, where unidentified individuals attacked a border check-point and killed seven people on 19 May, is an important crossing point on the way to the country's second-largest city, Bobo-Dioulasso.⁶

Burkina Faso is not the only possible entry point for groups seeking to extend their influence into West Africa. Several incidents have occurred on the border between Mali and Côte d'Ivoire, including the abduction of a Colombian nun in the Sikasso region in February 2017.⁷ In recent months, the jihadist group Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) appears to be trying to open a corridor from northern Mali to north-western Nigeria and northern Benin, passing through the Nigerian town of

¹ Burkina Faso's special relationship with the coastal south manifests itself in various ways: the far north of Ghana is the cradle of the Mossi Empire, the main Burkinabé ethnic group; millions of Burkinabé live in Côte d'Ivoire; the ports of Lomé (Togo), Abidjan (Côte d'Ivoire) and Tema (Ghana) are important supply points for the capital, Ouagadougou.

² According to the most recent census, in 2006 Burkina Faso's population was 23.2 per cent Christian, 15.3 per cent animist and a little over 60 per cent Muslim. In Mali and Niger, more than 90 per cent of the population is Muslim.

³ Crisis Group interviews, researchers and soldiers, Accra, June 2019.

⁴ "Deux Français enlevés au Bénin libérés par l'armée au Burkina Faso", *Le Figaro*, 10 May 2019.

⁵ "Le Bénin déclenche une opération militaire pour sécuriser la zone frontalière avec le Burkina Faso", *Xinhua*, 22 April 2019.

⁶ "Mali : deux localités attaquées dans le sud-est du pays", *RFI*, 20 May 2019.

⁷ "Une religieuse colombienne enlevée par des hommes armés au Mali", *VOA*, 8 February 2017.

Dogondoutchi.⁸ For its part, the Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP), an offshoot of Boko Haram, is hoping to benefit from the chaos caused by an unprecedented crime wave in the Nigerian state of Zamfara, on the border with Niger, to sell weapons and help its members gain access to south-western Niger.⁹

At present, jihadist groups seem to be advancing toward the south and east of Burkina Faso, approaching the Gulf of Guinea states. On 7 November 2019, an attack on a convoy of workers from the Boungou gold mine, which killed at least 38 people, confirmed their presence in the east of the country, bordering Benin and Togo. This attack occurred in spite of the Otapuanu military operation, which was launched on 7 March 2019 and which authorities had hailed as a success.¹⁰ It has heightened the concerns of mining companies, showing that armed groups were active in an area close to their sites, particularly in northern Ghana.¹¹ Bringing further legitimacy to these concerns, Burkinabé security forces recently intervened in the region of Pô, a town bordering Ghana in the south east of the country, killing six individuals suspected of terrorism.¹²

Burkina Faso's stability does not depend solely on the security of regions like the north and east, where armed groups are present. In a country where popular insurrections have led the head of state to resign not once but twice, in 1966 and 2014, social tensions resulting from poor living conditions pose a real threat to the leadership elected in 2015. As well as contributing to the efficiency of Burkina Faso's security apparatus, the country's partners should help defuse public anger by financially supporting the government of President Roch Marc Christian Kaboré, but also by facilitating dialogue between it and the opposition and civil society.

Partner countries, along with regional and international institutions, should also pay close attention to the political fragility of Burkina Faso. The presidential election scheduled for 2020 is crucial for the country, but there is no guarantee that it will pass off peacefully. For the first time in decades, there will be an open ballot with an uncertain outcome. The sense of unfettered competition is whetting politicians' appetites. In a country where jihadist and self-defence groups are both active, and civilian volunteers are engaged alongside the regular armed forces, any of the candidates could be tempted to use force against his opponents.¹³ Finally, for the first time in Burkina's history, the diaspora, which includes several million people living in nearby countries, will be able to vote. Emigrés could well determine the election result.

⁸ Crisis Group interviews, counter-terrorism expert, Dakar, September 2019; and former Nigerian senior official, Niamey, October 2019.

⁹ Crisis Group interviews, soldiers and diplomats, Abuja, June 2019.

¹⁰ Operation Otapuanu – “Lightning” in Gulmacema, the language of the Gourmantché, the main ethnic group in the eastern region – brought together the armed forces of Benin, Niger and Togo and was aimed at removing armed groups from eastern Burkina Faso. But the attacks resumed after a brief lull, with 23 violent incidents in the eastern region in September 2019 alone. “Burkina Faso : au moins 38 personnes tuées dans une attaque ‘planifiée’ contre un convoi minier”, *Le Monde*, 7 November 2019.

¹¹ Crisis Group interview, consultant, London, November 2019.

¹² “Burkina : l’armée dit avoir démantelé une cellule terroriste dans le centre-sud”, RFI, 30 November 2019. For several months, military sources have been reporting the presence of jihadist militants in the forest of Nazinga, near from the border town of Pô. Crisis Group email correspondence, international military officer, September 2019.

¹³ “Terrorisme au Burkina : le président lance le recrutement de volontaires”, *AfricTelegraph.com*, 7 November 2019.

Their votes must be accurately counted in order to avoid disputes. In other words, other coastal countries, notably Côte d'Ivoire, will also need to prepare for the Burkinabé election.

Burkina Faso cannot afford a new political crisis or period of transition like that which followed the departure of President Blaise Compaoré in 2014. The actors in this transition used the army for political ends, to advance or defend their own interests, diverting it from its main mission of territorial defence.¹⁴ A new phase of political instability marked by the absence of a strong, legitimate executive would produce similar results, further damaging the security forces' capacity to fight armed groups. As such, the wider the "Burkinabé door" opens, the greater the risk that the central Sahel's violence will become a broader regional phenomenon. The coming months are crucial for both the country and the region. Under pressure from both jihadists and an institutional crisis, the Burkinabé state would likely crumble, losing its ability to stop militant groups from spreading southward.

III. Jihadist Ambitions for Expansion in the Gulf of Guinea

For the past several years, armed groups active in the Sahel have referred in their declarations to the destabilisation of countries in the Gulf of Guinea. In a video dated 8 November 2018, three leaders of the Group to Support Islam and Muslims (GSIM) – Iyad Ag Ghali, Djamel Okacha and Amadou Koufa – a coalition of jihadist groups created in 2017 and affiliated with al-Qaeda, called on the Fulani people dispersed across the Sahel and West Africa to "pursue jihad" in other countries, notably citing Senegal, Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana and Cameroon.¹⁵

As yet, no al-Qaeda or ISIS figure has announced a detailed plan to destabilise Burkina Faso and turn it into jihadist corridor leading to coastal countries, although several incidents suggest collaboration between different jihadist armed groups on Burkinabé soil. In 2014 and 2015, unidentified combatants coming from Mali reportedly carried out reconnaissance operations in Benin and Burkina Faso, in the W National Park, not far from the Pendjari National Park where two French tourists were kidnapped and their Beninese guide killed last May.¹⁶ Arrested in April 2019 in Burkina Faso, Oumarou Diallo, the commander of a local jihadist group known as the Diawo Group, had a list of contacts in Benin, Togo and Ghana, demonstrating links with these countries.¹⁷ Several analysts interpret this collaboration as the sign of a joint project that seeks to bring about Burkina Faso's collapse so as to open a passage into Togo, Benin, Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire.¹⁸

For these groups, there are many advantages to opening new southern fronts in the coastal countries' northern regions. As an extension of the Sahel, these border

¹⁴ Crisis Group interviews, security officials and diplomats, Ouagadougou, July-September 2019.

¹⁵ "Au Mali, trois importants chefs djihadistes appellent à 'poursuivre le djihad'", *Le Monde*, 9 November 2018.

¹⁶ Antonin Tisseron, "Jihadist Threat: The Gulf of Guinea States Up Against the Wall", Institut Thomas More, March 2019.

¹⁷ Alex Thurston, "Escalating conflicts in Burkina Faso", Rosa Luxemburg Foundation, 2019.

¹⁸ "Sahel : les groupes terroristes ensemble pour prendre le Burkina Faso", RFI, 3 October 2019.

areas have practical benefits, serving as a rear base for rest and logistics. Crisis Group has received reports from several sources that armed militants from Burkina Faso are moving regularly along the Ghanaian and Togolese borders, on their way to “rest areas” in these countries.¹⁹

As jihadist groups spread their attacks across a wider geographic area, they hinder the campaigns of regional and international forces by obliging them to disperse. The militants adopted this decentralisation strategy in 2013, when the French Operation Serval drove them out of towns they were occupying in Mali. They have since sought to take over rural areas abandoned by the state and weakened by local tensions, in particular along borders. The push toward the Gulf of Guinea seems to be a continuation of this trend toward dispersal of the enemy, while putting pressure on fragile border areas.²⁰

Finally, with a foothold in the coastal countries’ northern areas, the region’s jihadist groups could establish way stations allowing them to get closer to prime targets in the major coastal cities. Another feat like the March 2016 attack on the Ivorian seaside town of Grand-Bassam would heighten the unrest that the jihadists crave; it would also effectively punish countries like Togo and Côte d’Ivoire for their participation in the UN’s Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA).²¹ Ivorian authorities, with the help of French intelligence services, reportedly thwarted several attacks in Abidjan last May.²² Obtaining this foothold would allow jihadist groups to extend the corridor stretching from northern Mali to north-western Nigeria and northern Benin.

IV. The Shared Weaknesses of the Central Sahel and Gulf of Guinea

It is difficult to predict which Gulf of Guinea countries are most likely to be infected by the jihadist contagion in the months or years to come. This vast area includes not only Burkina Faso’s immediate neighbours, but also Guinea, which for the moment seems impervious to jihadist attacks, and even Senegal, which has strengthened security at its borders in recent years, notably to avoid an attack in its capital, Dakar.²³

With the exception of Côte d’Ivoire, events in the northern regions of the coastal countries bordering Burkina Faso are little known. The north of Benin, Togo and Ghana has, until recently, remained on the periphery of researchers’ concerns, at least from a security perspective. This area was spared the major West African crises of recent decades, including the Mano River wars and the first years of the Sahelian crisis.

In addition, there is no obvious shared weakness that armed groups could exploit. These countries’ northern regions are made up of territories that are highly hetero-

¹⁹ Crisis Group interviews, military officials, Ouagadougou and Paris, February-March 2019.

²⁰ See Vincent Foucher and Jean-Hervé Jézéquel, “Forced Out of Towns in the Sahel, Africa’s Jihadists Go Rural”, Crisis Group Commentary, 11 January 2017.

²¹ In addition to Togo and Côte d’Ivoire, Benin and Ghana contribute troops to MINUSMA. “Côte d’Ivoire : après le choc de Grand-Bassam”, *Jeune Afrique*, 28 March 2016.

²² *La Lettre du Continent*, 12 June 2019.

²³ Senegal, for instance, created an Intelligence Delegation, which brings together all the state’s intelligence services under the presidency’s authority. See “Jihadisme : l’état se resserre autour des Etats de l’Afrique de l’Ouest”, RFI, 25 November 2019.

geneous in terms of demography, politics and economics. In this area, stretching for hundreds of kilometres, local dynamics will determine where communal tensions and frustrations will continue to simmer, and where they will boil over into violent movements, led either by jihadists or other armed groups.²⁴ Similarly, each country's religious realities are complex. It is too simplistic to view the coastal countries as structured around a Muslim north and a Christian south. Such a picture takes no account of the mass migration from north to south, the high incidence of mixed marriage – which has increased with urbanisation – or the large numbers of animists.

A trend has been emerging in recent years, however: the gap is widening between these northern areas and the central state, while the southern coastline attracts the bulk of investment contributing to economic development and modernisation. Ghana provides a clear example. Here, roughly one quarter of the population lives below the poverty line. Yet 70 per cent of people in the north are afflicted by poverty, despite the Ghanaian state's efforts in the 2000s, notably to provide health care and other infrastructure in Tamélé and its surroundings.²⁵ According to the World Bank, the situation is similar in Côte d'Ivoire, where "the northern and north-western regions of the country have higher poverty rates (over 60 per cent) than coastal areas and the south-western region (under 40 per cent)".²⁶

Alarming, countries in the Gulf of Guinea have neglected outlying zones in proximity to the turbulent Sahel. In the central Sahel, this lack of state control is a major cause of the increased violence in certain peripheries. Similar to what is happening across the border in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, many people in northern parts of the Gulf of Guinea countries are also facing difficulties with access to natural resources, leading to clashes between farmers and herders, which have contributed heavily to the escalation in central Mali and northern Burkina Faso.

Political solutions are urgently needed to lower the risk of armed conflict in the coastal countries' remote northern regions. Governments in the Gulf of Guinea should no longer link public spending to the electoral strategy of investing mainly in areas with the most voters or which support the ruling party. International partners must ditch the development dogma of placing infrastructure in the most densely populated areas as a way of maximising the return on investment.

Gauging the jihadist threat is by no means straightforward. Within the space of a few months, countries in the Gulf of Guinea and their partners have shifted from a sense of unease to a state of alert.²⁷ A French army reconnaissance mission in northern Benin indicated some concern already in April 2019. In July, the French army's chief of the defence staff, François Lecointre, replied to the question, "is there a risk that the jihadist movement could pose a threat to neighbouring West Africa?" by saying, "we're not there yet".²⁸ Just a few months later, in late November, he remarked that the French army was seeking to "prevent this [jihadist] hydra from continuing

²⁴ In the Nigerian state of Zamfara, for example, organised criminal groups with no basis in religious ideology are spreading terror. The Islamic State in West Africa has relations with these criminal groups, however, and is reportedly attempting to infiltrate them. Crisis Group interviews, soldiers, Abuja, June 2019.

²⁵ "Le Ghana veut se passer de l'aide internationale", *Le Monde*, 28 August 2019.

²⁶ "Côte d'Ivoire Economic Outlook: Understanding the Challenges of Urbanization in Height Charts", World Bank, February 2019.

²⁷ Crisis Group interview, UN diplomat, Dakar, March 2019.

²⁸ "L'indicateur de réussite n'est pas le nombre de djihadistes tués", *Le Monde*, 12 July 2019.

to expand into other West African countries”.²⁹ The spiralling violence in Burkina Faso has been instrumental in spreading this perception of insecurity.

The proceeds that various West and Central African countries derive from counter-terrorist activities have encouraged some of them to overstate a threat whose actual extent is sometimes debatable. No armed jihadist group has yet attacked the north of a country in the Gulf of Guinea. Jihadists have been blamed for many attacks on these countries’ borders, yet none have claimed responsibility themselves. A high-profile example was the killing of a Spanish priest and four Burkinabé customs officials on 15 February 2019 near Burkina Faso’s border with Togo.³⁰ The abduction of two French citizens in W National Park in Benin, in May 2019, was allegedly carried out by bandits who then tried to sell them to the ISGS or to Katiba Macina, a militant group based in central Mali.³¹ Although the jihadist forces’ involvement seems indirect, this incident has still stoked fears in West African countries and among their partners, reinforcing the idea that the regional security apparatus in place at the time of these events was not fit for purpose and needs rethinking.³²

V. The Elusive Regional Response

Since it fails to include all West African nations, the G5 Sahel Joint Force (Burkina Faso, Mali, Mauritania, Niger and Chad) appears to be an inadequate response to the regional contagion of jihadist violence. The G5 Sahel is based on the idea that the jihadist threat would expand horizontally, crossing the western Sahel from east to west; the force’s designers ignored the possibility of vertical expansion, despite warnings from many quarters. As early as 2017, an ECOWAS senior official expressed concerns about deficiencies in the G5 Sahel’s security measures, predicting attacks on coastal countries, particularly Benin.³³

The G5 and other West African countries have never properly joined forces. Detractors point to how the G5 artificially divides West Africa into two distinct spaces, ignoring the human and political ties between the northern and southern countries. The labelling of a Sahel region limited to four Francophone countries and Mauritania has also caused rifts in the region, reigniting old rivalries between Francophones and Anglophones, and rousing suspicions of French neo-colonial ambitions. Ivorian president Alassane Ouattara, patriarch of West Africa and undoubtedly France’s most loyal ally in the region, highlighted the G5 Sahel’s limitations last June: “MINUSMA and the G5 Sahel aren’t enough on their own. We must find ways to coordinate more broadly and more effectively in order to help these neighbouring countries combat terrorism”.³⁴

Over the coming months, ECOWAS will assess the possibility of greater coordination. During the extraordinary session of the summit for heads of state and govern-

²⁹ Interview with François Lecointre, France Inter, 27 November 2019.

³⁰ “Un prêtre espagnol et 4 douaniers tués dans une attaque djihadiste au Burkina Faso”, *Le Monde*, 16 February 2019.

³¹ Crisis Group interview, European military officer, Dakar, June 2019.

³² Crisis Group interview, diplomats, Accra and Paris, July 2019.

³³ Crisis Group interview, ECOWAS senior official, Dakar, November 2017.

³⁴ “Alassane Ouattara : face au jihadisme, ‘la Minusma et le G5 Sahel ne suffisent pas’”, *Jeune Afrique*, 21 June 2019.

ment held in Ouagadougou on 14 September, the sub-regional organisation adopted an action plan to coordinate and improve the effectiveness of counter-terrorism efforts, and committed itself, along with its member states, to raising \$1 million between 2020 and 2024.³⁵ This task is divided among various organisations, and three in particular: the G5; the multinational force comprising Nigeria, Chad, Cameroon and Niger in the fight against Boko Haram; and the Accra Initiative, a cooperative venture of Benin, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana and Togo that targets organised crime and "violent extremism" in the border regions of member countries.

ECOWAS is the best-placed organisation to coordinate efforts to combat jihadist violence across the region, being the only forum where the leaders of its member states can regularly meet to reach agreements and seek common ground. Most countries in the region have a presidential system and their heads of state enjoy far-reaching powers, a crucial asset when it comes to decision-making.

Regrettably, like the G5, ECOWAS is hampered by a lack of vision, and no president of its member countries has been able to provide clear leadership. The organisation has trouble speaking with one voice on important peace and security issues. Its recent promise in Ouagadougou to coordinate counter-terrorism activities is likely to founder without stronger and broader regional cooperation on the ground, encompassing issues of collective security. As the regional economic and demographic powerhouse, Nigeria should be the country to play this role. It is enmeshed in domestic problems, however, and sometimes finds itself at loggerheads with ECOWAS.³⁶ Nigeria should prioritise regaining its influence over the region and take the lead.

The most encouraging aspect of the action plan presented in Ouagadougou is the aim to self-finance counter-terrorism activities from 2020 to 2024. The G5 has shown how financial dependence can become paralysing. Its armed forces have been hindered by financial difficulties from the outset, a problem compounded by the group's lack of control over its own budget: its external funding depends on pledges, or else backers manage its resources instead of the member states themselves.

But the million-dollar budget announced by ECOWAS will be hard to raise in its entirety. In common with many regional organisations, ECOWAS needs to reconcile its international mission with powerful national interests. It also finds itself in a particularly tricky situation: more than one third of its members are preparing for presidential elections in 2020.³⁷ The organisation will face obstacles in mobilising the funds earmarked in Ouagadougou, since these countries will focus on their electoral processes or even prioritise the re-election of incumbent heads of state. Another

³⁵ "Final Communiqué of the Extraordinary Session of the Authority of Heads of State and Government on Terrorism", Ouagadougou, 14 September 2019. The plan unveiled in Ouagadougou is divided into eight areas: pooling and coordinating counter-terrorism initiatives; effective and direct information and intelligence sharing among the member states' security services; training and equipping public officers involved in counter-terrorism; strengthening border controls; increasing the control of weapons and dual-use goods; countering the financing of terrorism; and promoting inter-community dialogue. In broad terms, this plan does not promise any great innovations in the strategy for combating terrorism, adopted by ECOWAS in February 2013 in Yamoussoukro, in Côte d'Ivoire. See Crisis Group Africa Report N°234, *Implementing Peace and Security Architecture (III): West Africa*, 16 April 2016; and "ECOWAS Counter-Terrorism Strategy", ECOWAS, August 2013.

³⁶ On 20 August, Nigeria partially closed its border with Benin. ECOWAS protested this decision for contravening the agreement on free movement of people and goods within the ECOWAS area, but Nigeria refused to back down.

³⁷ These countries are Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Guinea, Niger and Togo.

challenge for ECOWAS is the insolvency of some of its members, such as the Sahel countries that lack the funds to pay for the G5 from their own budgets. The wealthiest contributor, Nigeria, is already contributing 70 per cent of the organisation's budget, and it can hardly be asked to give more.³⁸

For a group of poor and indebted countries, the advantage of spending such large sums on counter-terrorism initiatives is also arguable. Experience shows that money offers no guaranteed results. Nigeria spent \$2 billion on defence in 2018, yet it has been unable to overpower Boko Haram, a terrorist group with only a few thousand fighters.³⁹ The country has even been forced to call on Chad, whose defence spending ran to \$233 million in 2018, for help.⁴⁰

The region must find smarter, more effective ways of containing the jihadist threat: greater coordination; better intelligence gathering and sharing; and more effective border controls, which will require tackling the corruption that is rife in many customs services and police forces. ECOWAS must use the money to fill the gaps rather than spend it on expensive military operations that have yet to deliver on their promises. Three large-scale operations in May and November 2018 formed part of the Accra Initiative.⁴¹ Although it is difficult to be certain of the actual level of involvement of the hundreds of people arrested, the over-representation of the Peul among them raises questions.⁴² Giving into stigmatisation of particular ethnic groups would spur jihadist recruitment among those groups – as already seen in the Sahel.

Countries in the region should avoid unrealistic quick fixes and instead implement counter-terrorism plans based on budgets that can be rolled over for the long term. Experts agree that combating active jihadist movements in West Africa requires a lengthy commitment.

The Ouagadougou summit has not dispelled doubts about ECOWAS's ability to collaborate more effectively with neighbouring regions, particularly North and Central Africa. Meanwhile, the crises in the Sahel and the Lake Chad basin have revealed the geographic spread of armed groups' activities. Member states in different regional groupings therefore need to come up with coordinated responses. In this sense, the same criticism that the G5 is too geographically limited to be effective in combating terrorism could also be levelled at ECOWAS. Jihadism transcends the borders of West Africa and affects other countries such as Chad.

ECOWAS has not yet said how it plans to coordinate its Ouagadougou roadmap with European initiatives on security and development in the Sahel. One question, for example, is how it will accommodate the new Partnership for Security and Stability for the Sahel, or P3S, announced in Biarritz in August 2019 by France and Ger-

³⁸ Crisis Group interview, international official, Dakar, November 2019.

³⁹ "Military Expenditure by Country, in Constant (2017) US\$ m., 1988-2018", Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 2019.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ In May 2018, Benin, Burkina Faso, Ghana and Togo conducted Operation Koudalgou along their shared borders. A different set of countries – Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana – followed up in November 2018 with Operation Koudalgou II. Koudalgou I allegedly led to the arrest of 202 suspects, almost half of them in Togo. Another 170 people were allegedly arrested in November 2019 as a result of Operation Koudalgou III (Togo and Ghana). See "Can the Accra Initiative Prevent Terrorism in West African Coastal States?", Institute for Security Studies, 30 September 2019.

⁴² In early 2019, a list of 26 Peul from Burkina Faso arrested in Togo circulated on social media. Most of them are listed as farmers, herders or shepherds.

many. For the time being, P3S does not include ECOWAS as such – the first point of the communiqué announcing its existence does not mention the West African association, whereas it does refer to the African Union, the New Partnership for Africa's Development and the G5 Sahel Joint Force. But it might eventually welcome ECOWAS members.⁴³ Like ECOWAS, the yet-to-be-finalised P3S seeks to improve coordination of security and development projects in the region, particularly those led by European partners.⁴⁴

More significantly, the ECOWAS summit in Ouagadougou focused on combating jihadist violence as opposed to dealing with political issues. In so doing, this high-level meeting perpetuated a simplistic reading of the violence over the past six years in the Sahel: one positing that the violence stems solely from terrorist acts, rather than other roots, such as rural insurgencies. To make any real difference, ECOWAS must be more politically engaged and less fixated on security issues. It could start by drawing a distinction between actions labelled as “terrorism”-related, such as the Grand-Bassam attacks in 2016, and rebellions in rural parts of the Sahel. If ECOWAS continues to be locked into a security paradigm, referring to all violence as terrorism, it risks overlooking the eminently political dimension of a crisis that can translate into outright rejection of governments and raise questions about states' ability to control conflicts over access to natural resources.

VI. The Threat of Political Crises

ECOWAS must play a broader political role to ward off another threat looming over the region: the risk of conflict connected to electoral processes. In various coastal countries with elections scheduled for next year, political actors are working “to rekindle polarisation, stirring up tensions and violence”.⁴⁵ In the near future, many member countries could find themselves severely weakened by these political tensions. The emphasis on security and terrorism must not overshadow the fact that political crises are often as deadly as clashes with armed groups.⁴⁶ They also tend to weaken the armed forces by dividing them along party or ethnic lines. Political conflicts undo years of investment in training and force governments to use the security apparatus to monitor and punish their rivals. All these factors weaken their ability to tackle well-trained and well-prepared armed groups.

Tensions have been running high for the past several months in Benin, for example, after the executive branch moved to limit participation in the April 2019 legislative elections to two groups that support the president, Patrice Talon. Violence has broken out in various areas, leading to at least seven deaths in the capital Cotonou in May.⁴⁷ The political dialogue announced by President Talon on 10 October is a pointless exercise because it excludes serious opposition. In neighbouring Togo, a political

⁴³ “Biarritz Declaration for a G7 and Africa Partnership”, 26 August 2019.

⁴⁴ Crisis Group interview, diplomat, November 2019.

⁴⁵ See Gilles Olakunlé Yabi, “Les tourments de l’Afrique de l’Ouest, les ‘Chinois’ d’Abidjan et le devoir de lucidité”, Wathi, 25 September 2019.

⁴⁶ Between December 2010 and April 2011, a post-electoral crisis has led to more than 3,000 deaths in Côte d’Ivoire.

⁴⁷ “How Benin’s democratic crown has slipped”, BBC, 6 May 2019; and “Regional Overview – Africa”, ACLED, 7 May 2019.

crisis pitting a fragmented opposition against a dynastic ruling party remains unresolved after four decades, and a presidential election is also coming up next year.

Côte d'Ivoire is likewise faced with several obstacles less than a year ahead of its presidential election scheduled for October 2020. No consensus has been reached on the electoral framework, with the main opposition party, the Democratic Party of Côte d'Ivoire, refusing to sit on the independent electoral commission. The disagreements between participants about the rules of the game augur a tense election whose result could be contested. The unease could even trigger violent protests and a pre-electoral crisis.⁴⁸ Aggravating the situation still further, a few months ago the government launched a campaign of intimidation on the opposition, targeting high-profile figures, jeopardising the possibility of dialogue and fuelling resentment.⁴⁹

In Guinea, President Alpha Condé plans to run for a third term in 2020. His desire to amend the constitution accordingly has already sparked major protests, causing several deaths in October and November 2019.⁵⁰ His determination to cling to power could eventually lead to ethnic conflicts between his group, the Malinké, and the country's predominant Peul population, who are the majority in the opposition parties.

In certain countries of the Gulf of Guinea, the commitment to engage in counter-terrorism initiatives is sometimes unclear. Governments have occasionally diverted funds intended for security operations to monitor or repress the opposition instead of dealing with the threat of armed groups.⁵¹ Similarly, some leaders have realised that trumpeting counter-terrorism initiatives brings rewards from their backers, in the form of either extra funding or greater tolerance for authoritarian rule.

The risk lies in the combustible mix of the spreading jihadist threat to the countries in the Gulf of Guinea and the onset of violent political clashes in the cities to the south of these countries. If such disturbances erupt in one or more coastal countries, security forces could deploy in the south, increasing the distance between capitals and northern territories, and opening the way for jihadist groups to move in. ECO-WAS, with the support of experienced partners, particularly the UN Office for West Africa and the Sahel, should move as quickly as possible to contain the spread of political crises.

The regional organisation must condemn the attacks on fundamental rights occurring in some member states, such as the expulsion and intimidation of opposition members and the violent repression of protests. It should also remind its member countries about shared rules on electoral laws and independence of electoral bodies. In accordance with the protocol on democracy and good governance adopted by ECOWAS members on 21 December 2001, these governments should refrain from making "substantial modification [...] to the electoral laws in the last six months before the elections" and ensure that the "bodies responsible for organizing the elections [are] independent or neutral and ... have the confidence of all the political actors".⁵²

⁴⁸ Crisis Group interview, Ivorian opposition MP, London, November 2019.

⁴⁹ Crisis Group interviews, international consultant, European official, Ivorian MP, London, Brussels, October 2019.

⁵⁰ "In Guinea, two more killed in clashes between police and protesters", Reuters, 4 November 2019; and "Guinea police kill three in anti-Conde protest: hospital", AFP, 15 November 2019.

⁵¹ Crisis Group interview, UN official, Dakar, September 2019.

⁵² "ECOWAS Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance", 21 December 2001.

VII. Conclusion

In 2020, for the first time in its post-independence history, West Africa could face a major crisis coupling political disturbances in the south with insecurity in the north. The combination of these two flashpoints could be catastrophic for the region. To avert this possibility, awareness of the danger must be raised at the highest possible level. Leaders need to recognise that terrorism is not the only threat in the area, and that regional interests must take precedence over private and national considerations. Otherwise, various heads of state will soon find themselves the leaders of countries in turmoil.

Dakar/Brussels, 20 December 2019

Appendix A: Map of West Africa



Map No. 4533 UNITED NATIONS
October 2014

Department of Field Support
Cartographic Section

Appendix B: About the International Crisis Group

The International Crisis Group (Crisis Group) is an independent, non-profit, non-governmental organisation, with some 120 staff members on five continents, working through field-based analysis and high-level advocacy to prevent and resolve deadly conflict.

Crisis Group's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries or regions at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, it produces analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international, regional and national decision-takers. Crisis Group also publishes *CrisisWatch*, a monthly early-warning bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in up to 70 situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

Crisis Group's reports are distributed widely by email and made available simultaneously on its website, www.crisisgroup.org. Crisis Group works closely with governments and those who influence them, including the media, to highlight its crisis analyses and to generate support for its policy prescriptions.

The Crisis Group Board of Trustees – which includes prominent figures from the fields of politics, diplomacy, business and the media – is directly involved in helping to bring the reports and recommendations to the attention of senior policymakers around the world. Crisis Group is chaired by former UN Deputy Secretary-General and Administrator of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Lord (Mark) Malloch-Brown.

Crisis Group's President & CEO, Robert Malley, took up the post on 1 January 2018. Malley was formerly Crisis Group's Middle East and North Africa Program Director and most recently was a Special Assistant to former U.S. President Barack Obama as well as Senior Adviser to the President for the Counter-ISIL Campaign, and White House Coordinator for the Middle East, North Africa and the Gulf region. Previously, he served as President Bill Clinton's Special Assistant for Israeli-Palestinian Affairs.

Crisis Group's international headquarters is in Brussels, and the organisation has offices in seven other locations: Bogotá, Dakar, Istanbul, Nairobi, London, New York, and Washington, DC. It has presences in the following locations: Abuja, Algiers, Bangkok, Beirut, Caracas, Gaza City, Guatemala City, Hong Kong, Jerusalem, Johannesburg, Juba, Mexico City, New Delhi, Rabat, Tbilisi, Toronto, Tripoli, Tunis, and Yangon.

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