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Issue Brief

Extremist Resilience in Africa

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Summary

As coercive actors capable of sustained campaigns, violent non-state actors across Africa have leveraged their violent activities to extract concessions from states. The broader Sahel region remains the global epicentre of terrorism today, primarily attributed to militant Islamism.

Introduction

On 22 March 2026, the Malian government released more than 100 alleged jihadist prisoners in exchange for safe passage for fuel convoys.[1] The fuel crisis had brought the country to a standstill last year due to repeated attacks on fuel convoys en route to Mali by the Al-Qaeda affiliate, Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM). The fuel blockade had resulted in a sudden surge in food prices and the closure of multiple fuel stations in the capital, Bamako. By December 2025, fuel prices had surged above US$ 6 per litre in areas such as Ségou and Mopti, marking an increase of approximately 22 per cent since April 2025.[2] As a landlocked country, the growing pressures imposed by the fuel blockade were intended to stoke further tensions in a society rife with an incomplete transition to military rule, persistent ethnic violence, a worsening humanitarian crisis, and a fragmented counter-terror campaign.

Other parts of the African continent, including Nigeria and areas surrounding the Lake Chad region, have confronted sustained terror campaigns launched by violent extremist groups like Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad (JAS), or Boko Haram, Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), and Islamic State in Central Africa Province (ISCAP), among others, despite sustained state pressure and military campaigns.

The operational and organisational durability of these non-state actors has shaped the violent extremist landscape. Extremist groups and movements have frequently targeted key state infrastructure, civilians and revenue-generation pathways. This is specifically aimed at eroding trust in state agencies, amplifying existing socio-economic grievances, and undermining state capacity to protect unarmed civilians and supply chains sustaining economic infrastructure. Overall, violent extremism in Africa has proved resilient despite efforts to institutionalise peace, stability and good governance. This transformation has been increasingly evident in Mali.

Coercive Bargaining: Mali

JNIM has systematically targeted key highways, supply routes and fuel convoys, treating them as central to its objectives of pushing a turbulent country into economic paralysis and containing it there. Such pressure tactics have yielded results for JNIM, as evident in the prisoner release reports, as part of its high-intensity, low-cost warfare.

[1] **"Mali Frees 100 Jihadists in Deal to Stop Attacks on Fuel Trucks"**, *PUNCH*, 22 March 2026.

[2] Jonas Schaaf, **"Mali's Acute Security and Energy Crisis in Bamako and Beyond: Four Scenarios for the Road Ahead"**, *PRIF Blog*, Peace Research Institute Frankfurt, 9 December 2025.

The dynamics of the conflict between the military junta and JNIM have been altered. Counter-terrorism has expanded beyond the focus on organisational degradation, territorial losses and leadership decapitation. Today, it appears to be centred more prominently around crisis management, as the state finds itself boxed into a position where it must engage in backdoor negotiations with the non-state actors it had focused on defeating militarily.

When President Assimi Goita, the head of the military junta, assumed power after a coup in 2021, he had committed the new regime to counter jihadist violence. JNIM's attacks have repeatedly undermined this pledge. Furthermore, he has been forced to fall back on the negotiation tactics applied by his predecessor, Ibrahim Boubacar Keita, who ruled Mali from 2013 to 2020.

Moreover, state capacity to neutralise extremist networks is increasingly depleting. This was made evident with the onset of the fuel blockade, as JNIM turned the tide against state forces and their attempts to curb its revenue flows. The military junta had initially sought to restrict the trade of small-scale fuel, for example, through jerry cans in rural regions from July 2025 onwards. This was aimed at cracking down on JNIM's operational capabilities, which were partly funded by the sale of small-scale fuel in such areas.[3]

The plausible intent of the fuel blockade, as gauged by several analysts, was to instigate people to revolt against the state by sowing discontent. By June 2025, the Malian government had put in place several restrictions, including the banning of organised meetings and political parties, and the imposition of a renewable presidential term for Assimi Goita.

Another key dilemma confronting countries like Mali is the growing evidence of kidnapping-for-ransom, especially of non-Malians, as a tactic adopted as part of terror financing revenues for groups like JNIM. This has created an unlawful and parallel economy within the country. The absence of capacity-building measures to regulate and crack down on such terror-financing avenues, which remain not only operational but also ever-expansive, is expected to limit further the junta's ability to achieve credible counter-terror successes.

Operational Resilience: Nigeria

While Mali illustrates the example of coercive bargaining strategies applied by violent extremists, Nigeria represents how militant groups have displayed

[3] Shola Lawal, **"Is Mali About to Fall to al-Qaeda Affiliate JNIM?"**, *Al Jazeera*, 6 November 2025.

operational resilience, prompting a top-down push for negotiation with extremists, displaying the leverage exercised by such groups in fragile conflict settings.

In the aftermath of the coordinated bombings, attributed to Boko Haram, which shook Maiduguri on 16 March 2026—the capital of Borno State, situated in Nigeria's Northeast region—President Bola Ahmed Tinubu had tweeted his condolences. He, however, noted that these terrorist acts were "the final desperate and frantic attempts by criminals and terrorist elements trying to instil and spread fear, as they are under constant pressure from our brave armed forces …"[4] As reported by *Human Rights Watch*, Borno has remained the epicentre of the Islamist insurgency plaguing Nigeria since July 2009, and the Maiduguri bombings were "indiscriminate and therefore a war crime under international law".[5]

The non-state actors have shifted their strategy from staging singular and contained strikes to simultaneous coordinated bombings using body-borne IEDs. They now focus on targeting key urban centres and commercial hubs that had remained insulated from acts of terrorism for nearly five years. The key target sites of the March 2026 bombings were the University of Maiduguri Teaching Hospital (UMTH), the post office, and the popular Monday market.

The capital city also hosts key humanitarian agencies providing aid relief to people in the broader state of Borno affected by the persisting Islamist insurgency. If similar attacks continue, they could undermine humanitarian efforts and make independent aid actors or state-backed agencies reluctant to deploy services in vulnerable regions due to the risk of physical harm or logistical disruptions. What is also apparent is that the government has substantially ceded ground in terms of authority and monopoly of violence to groups like Boko Haram, thereby eroding its sovereign authority over its borders.

This appears to be the case despite the Nigerian government launching Operation Savannah Shield in response to militants attacking Muslim-majority villages of Woro and Nuku in February 2026, which resulted in at least 162 casualties, with fatalities primarily from the dominant religious denomination.[6]

In this backdrop, what emerges as an even more concerning trend is how the country's resources are stretched thin due to the deployment of security forces in the Northeast to deal with Islamist insurgents like Boko Haram, the Fulani herders–

[4] Bola Ahmed Tinubu, **"The recent news from Maiduguri, Borno State, is profoundly upsetting. I mourn those…"**, *X*, 17 March 2026, 2:41 p.m.

[5] **"Nigeria: Maiduguri Bombings Show New Threat to Civilians"**, *Human Rights Watch*, 26 March 2026.

[6] Ope Adetayo, **"Nigeria Sets Up New Military Operation to Fight Extremists Accused of Killing 162 Villagers"**, *Los Angeles Times*, 5 February 2026.

sedentary farmers' protracted conflict in Nigeria's North-Central, and separatist movements led by groups like the Indigenous People of Biafra.[7] As a result, spillover of extremism from bordering countries like Benin, Mali and Niger could exacerbate humanitarian, migration and security crises, as well as infrastructural devastation within the country, and erode any potential of establishing itself as a credible counter-terror partner to regional or international actors.

This could, in turn, push Nigeria up the Global Terrorism Index ranking, which, according to the 2026 Report, currently places it as the 4th most-affected country by terrorism. The report notes Nigeria

> has experienced a steady rise in terrorism-related deaths since 2022, recording 237 more fatalities in 2025 than in 2024. The increase in terrorist activity comes amidst a surge in both ideological and criminal violence in the country. Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) and Boko Haram were responsible for 82.8 per cent of all terrorism deaths in the country in 2025.[8]

These developments underline the resilience of Boko Haram despite the suicide of its leader, Abubakar Shekau, in May 2021 after he detonated a suicide vest to avoid capture by ISWAP fighters, and the subsequent defection of his organisation's members to the rival jihadist group.

Analysts note that

> Boko Haram's insurgency has persisted for over a decade, not because Nigeria's military is weak, but because the group operates from the geographic and strategic margins that Nigeria's power structure has never fully controlled… the Lake Chad subregion where Boko Haram operates is closer to Libya and Sudan than to Lagos … This is not a story of a localised insurgency. It is a story of a Sahelian and Saharan conflict grafted onto a West African state.[9]

As the United States halted its military aid to Nigeria amid the Gulf conflict, thereby limiting its counter-terror campaign, questions about re-engaging non-state actors have been raised by high-level government officials, including Nuhu Ribadu, the National Security Advisor, who publicly referred to some jihadists as "brothers",

[7] Abiodun Jamiu, **"Nigeria's New Corridor Opens Doors for Jihadi Groups"**, *DW*, 10 March 2026.

[8] **"Global Terrorism Index 2026"**, Report, Institute for Economics & Peace, March 2026.

[9] Oge Okonkwo, **"Boko Haram's insurgency has persisted for over a decade not because Nigeria's military…"**, *LinkedIn*, 27 March 2026.

and has called for dialogue to resolve the protracted insurgency, which has resulted in 350,000 fatalities and displaced another 3.5 million people.[10]

Arguably, three fundamental drivers could help understand the reversion to acceptance of negotiation strategies by state leaders:

a. Growing recognition of the rising civilian costs associated with a protracted armed conflict and the need for strategic recalibration amid a growing inertia that has set in the counter-terror approach.

b. The state finds itself overextended due to multiple conflict theatres.

c. The need to impose a strategic tactical pause to rebuild its military and intelligence capacity before renewing its counter-terror campaign.

Expanding Militant Islamism

Terrorism in Africa is not limited to hotspots like Mali and Nigeria. It has also expanded into conflict theatres, such as the DRC, over the years. By 2025, the DRC was one of the highest contributors in Africa to terrorism-related fatalities, of which civilians bore the largest impact. Last year, deaths surged by approximately 28 per cent, totalling 467, out of which 447 were civilian casualties, due to violence carried out by ISIS-affiliated Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), also recognised as ISCAP since 2019.[11] The deliberate targeting of civilians by ADF on such a significant scale signals the strategic intent of the group to sow mass hysteria among unarmed populations, disrupt established economic activities, and exacerbate the forced displacement crisis.

The broader security crises have long been underway due to the resurgence of the civil war between the rebel group M23 (allegedly backed by Rwanda, thereby regionalising the armed conflict) and DRC security forces since January 2025. According to the United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner (UNOHCHR), by March 2026, within a span of five months, at least 260 people had been killed, hundreds of thousands displaced, 31 drone and air strikes carried out, 600 summary executions, and nearly 1,500 abductions, intensifying the worsening humanitarian crisis.[12]

[10] Obi Anyadike, **"Why Nigeria Needs to Talk with the jihadists"**, *SEMAFOR*, 23 March 2026.

[11] **"Global Terrorism Index 2026"**, no. 8.

[12] **"Deputy High Commissioner Al-Nashif on the Democratic Republic of the Congo: As Peace Negotiations Continue, People Cannot Wait"**, Statements and Speeches, United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, 25 March 2026.

Moreover, in March 2026, the group used children, who are being groomed as violent extremist fighters, to attack a mine operated by Kimia Mining, a Chinese-owned mining company. It resulted in around 24 casualties—civilian and military—and no less than 100 abductions.[13] This marks a significant escalation, as it is the first time this group has targeted a Chinese company. This incident denotes how the group is attempting to rapidly externalise the terror threat as part of its focus on targeting near and far enemies. China has frequently been one of the primary targets of terror groups, from Afghanistan to the DRC, by Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) and ISCAP, as well as in propaganda disseminated online.

As has been the case in Nigeria, the state's security forces, due to limited human and material resources, have faced considerable challenges in successfully combating terrorism. For the DRC, it too finds itself facing threats at the intersection of separatist insurgency, herder–farming community conflicts, and terrorism. However, what is unique to this case study is that certain reports suggest M23 and ADF have negotiated an agreement to avoid armed clashes and have often simultaneously targeted nearby regions.[14] This has thereby constrained the resources that state leaders can deploy to a consolidated zone, further straining their overall capacity.

At the same time, ACLED data suggests that ISCAP has adopted a rarely observed collaborative approach by allying with Lendu militants last year.[15] This is a particularly crucial development because the Lendu community is not only non-Salafist in its orientation, but its belief system also sits at the convergence of Christianity and traditional rituals.

Probably, this contradictory ideological alliance could be short-term and specific to the DRC for now. However, it does open up future possibilities of ISIS affiliates forming objective-specific alliances with other armed factions that may emerge during the course of the multiple conflicts currently unfolding. Moreover, a persistent record of indiscriminate violence against civilians is likely to continue occurring.

Furthermore, the growing usage of drones by militant groups, in the face of conventional military campaigns by the state, reflects a continuity in the low-cost,

[13] Caleb Weiss and Ryan O' Farrell, **"Analysis: The Islamic State's Targeting of a Chinese Mine in Congo Proves the Group is a Resilient Threat"**, *Long War Journal*, Foundation for Defense of Democracies, 24 March 2026.

[14] Ladd Serwat, **"As M23 Rebels Take Hold of Eastern Congo, the Islamic State is Capitalizing on the Chaos"**, Report, ACLED, 18 June 2025.

[15] Héni Nsaibia, Ladd Serwat, Jalale Getachew Birru and Samuele Minelli Zuffa, **"Africa Overview: December 2025"**, Monthly Regional Updates, ACLED, 8 December 2025.

high-impact strategy. This remains effectively unaddressed by such fragile states and has been adopted by violent extremist movements globally. Meanwhile, there are limited prospects for framing an African response to what is a regional as well as a broader continental security challenge. This is due to the lack of convergence in addressing shared security concerns amid a tumultuous governance and political landscape, as well as reported external interference.

Conclusion

Violent non-state actors have demonstrated the capacity to extract concessions from state actors by displaying ideological and operational resilience, carrying out targeted attacks using decentralised cells and affiliates, and forming tactical alliances to undermine state authority and erode its monopoly of violence, a defining characteristic of a nation-state. This has taken place even amid persistent counter-terror campaigns and external interventions and assistance.

As a result, they have redefined the rules of engagement and the conventional patterns that shape state–non-state actor conflicts. Furthermore, attacks on key state infrastructure, including those linked to commercial and economic activities, underscore that non-state actors seek greater leverage in future negotiations.

Finally, as states recalibrate and reposition their counter-terrorism strategies, it is vital to anchor them in a tri-faceted approach which accounts for addressing physical manifestations of terrorism, terror financing and parallel governance pathways, and focus on strengthening domestic and regional intelligence-sharing platforms and institute where there is an evident absence, while cultivating interoperability with like-minded partners to successfully confront a shifting balance of power and rules of conflict engagement.

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