
**TERRORISM AS POLITICS IN AFRICA: DECOLONIAL PERSPECTIVES ON STATE
FRAGILITY AND VIOLENCE**

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Abstract

This article critically examines terrorism in Africa through a historically grounded, decolonial, and theoretically plural lens, drawing primarily on Critical Terrorism Studies (CTS) and Postcolonial Theory. Challenging dominant narratives that frame African terrorism solely as religious extremism, irrational violence, or criminality, the study situates political violence within broader contexts of postcolonial state formation, hybrid governance, and contested legitimacy. Using a qualitative, interpretivist methodology, the research employs case studies from Nigeria, Somalia, Mali, the Sahel, the DRC, and Kenya to explore the interactions between state fragility, structural marginalization, and insurgent activity. The analysis reveals that terrorism in African contexts often functions as a form of political negotiation and resistance where formal institutions have failed or reproduced coercion. The article further translates these insights into operational policy strategies, emphasizing community-based conflict resolution, legal reform, hybrid governance inclusion, socio-economic interventions, regional coordination, and restorative political dialogue. It concludes by advocating for a decolonial reframing that centers African histories, challenges Western epistemic dominance, and promotes inclusive, accountable, and contextually grounded approaches to security and governance.

Keywords: Terrorism, Politics, Africa

1. Introduction

The African continent today confronts a deeply political form of terrorism, one that cannot be separated from histories of colonial domination, post-colonial state fragility, and contemporary governance challenges. In May 2022, the African Union (AU) Assembly of Heads of State and Government convened its extraordinary summit on terrorism and unconstitutional changes of government, acknowledging a “metastasis of terrorism” across the continent and demanding “a

real new approach” beyond purely security-driven responses (African Union, 2022; Karuhanga, 2022). That summit highlighted a pressing need: to move beyond traditional counterterrorism approaches and embrace human-security-centred frameworks that address root causes as much as tactical threats (Amani Africa, 2022; AU, 2022).

This call resonates precisely because terrorism in Africa has often served as a political instrument, whether it is wielded by non-state insurgents or even by states themselves. The United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (2008) emphasises that terrorist violence exacts staggering human costs, undermines governments, civil society, peace, and development, and often triggers counter-measures that themselves violate human rights and rule-of-law obligations. The agency warns that repressive counter-terror measures such as torture, indefinite detention, and extrajudicial practices can paradoxically deepen insecurity (OHCHR, 2008).

Understanding terrorism as political violence in Africa requires distinguishing between definitions. Shughart (2006) raises critical questions about whether politically motivated violence equals terrorism, and if governments themselves may be perpetrators. Scholars such as Black (2004) argue for a distinction between state terrorism and non-state terrorism, while Blakesley (1992) contends definitions must hinge on whether extreme fear is produced among a targeted audience. These debates illuminate why the labels “terror” and “terrorism” are socially and politically contested: liberation movements may be construed as terrorists or freedom fighters depending on perspective (Antwi-Boasiako, 2010).

This contestation is especially potent in the African context. Antwi-Boasiako (2010) critiques dominant Western terrorism scholarship for overlooking African historical realities of slavery, colonization, and liberation struggles, arguing that terrorism has frequently been institutionalized as a tool by both colonial and post-independence regimes. At the same time, political violence by non-state actors is often rooted in state failure, exclusionary governance, or historical marginalization. Forest and Giroux (2011) stress that terrorism and political violence in Africa are deeply interconnected with governance deficits, porous borders, and under-governed spaces.

Contemporary terrorist groups such as Boko Haram, Al-Shabaab, and Jama’at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) illustrate the political dimension of organized violence. JNIM’s expansion across Mali, Burkina Faso, and coastal West African countries reflects the ability of militant groups to exploit governance vacuums, ethnic resentments, and security failures to establish quasi-political control and legitimacy in contested areas. Sub-Saharan Africa, recorded as the “new

epicenter of extremism,” saw over 4,000 attacks and nearly 18,500 deaths between 2017 and 2021, with the majority of recruits citing socioeconomic marginalization and state human-rights abuses as motivations (UNDP, 2023).

These developments highlights a central argument: terrorism in Africa cannot be understood purely as a security or criminal problem. It operates as a form of politics used by a range of actors to contest, reinforce, or reshape state power. The research gap lies in the tendency of both mainstream terrorism studies and African policy discourses to treat terrorism primarily as a security challenge, neglecting its embeddedness in historical legacies, state-society struggles, and contested notions of legitimacy. Existing studies often separate “terrorism” from broader patterns of political violence, or apply universalized Western frameworks that obscure African experiences. This article addresses that gap by reframing terrorism in Africa as politics rooted in colonial histories, postcolonial governance, and the lived realities of exclusion and resistance, while advancing decolonial approaches that prioritize justice, inclusion, and human security.

2. Statement of the Problem

Despite decades of international and regional counterterrorism initiatives, terrorism in Africa has not only persisted but intensified, expanding geographically and mutating in form. From the Sahel to the Horn of Africa and the Lake Chad Basin, violent extremism continues to thrive in contexts marked by weak institutions, socioeconomic marginalization, historical grievances, and political exclusion (UNDP, 2023; African Union, 2022). While much of the literature and policy response have framed terrorism in Africa as a security problem or a criminal phenomenon, such framings often ignore or obscure its political dimensions. In reality, many non-state armed groups across the continent employ terrorism as a strategic means to negotiate power, contest state legitimacy, and communicate political objectives, whether through ideological, religious, or ethno-political platforms (Forest & Giroux, 2011; Antwi-Boasiako, 2010).

At the same time, state actors have also been implicated in practices that mirror terrorism in both intent and effect. Extrajudicial killings, forced disappearances, torture, the suppression of dissent, and indiscriminate military operations have characterized many state responses to insurgencies, raising concerns about the weaponization of counterterrorism as a tool for regime consolidation and political repression (OHCHR, 2008; Amani Africa, 2022). Yet dominant international discourses continue to treat state violence as distinct from terrorism, reinforcing a double standard

that shields governments from accountability while delegitimizing oppositional violence regardless of context or cause (Shughart, 2006; Black, 2004).

This conceptual and normative asymmetry raises critical questions about the nature of terrorism in Africa: Who gets to define terrorism? When is violence considered politically legitimate? And under what conditions does the label of "terrorist" serve more to criminalize political resistance than to describe objective acts of terror? These questions remain underexplored in mainstream academic and policy circles, despite their centrality to the lived experiences of many African societies struggling with complex and overlapping forms of political violence (Crenshaw, 1979; Blakesley, 1992).

Current counterterrorism approaches largely driven by militarized strategies and donor securitization have often failed to stem the tide of terrorism. Instead, they have undermined human rights, exacerbated state fragility, and eroded public trust in state institutions (OHCHR, 2008; Amani Africa, 2022). This failure calls into question the effectiveness of prevailing models and highlights the need for a deeper, more critical engagement with the political roots and realities of terrorism on the continent.

This article therefore seeks to confront the analytical and practical blind spots that shape contemporary understandings of terrorism in Africa. It aims to reframe terrorism not merely as a threat to security, but as a deeply political phenomenon produced, defined, and responded to within a contested field of power.

3. Conceptual Clarification and Literature Review

Terrorism as a Contested Concept

Despite decades of international and regional counterterrorism initiatives, terrorism in Africa has not only persisted but expanded across the Sahel, the Horn of Africa, and the Lake Chad Basin (UNDP, 2023; AU, 2022). Dominant policy approaches continue to frame terrorism narrowly as a security or criminal issue, reducing it to extremist violence detached from political context. This framing obscures the fact that many armed groups deploy terrorism strategically to contest state legitimacy, negotiate power, and articulate grievances along religious, ideological, or ethno-political lines (Forest & Giroux, 2011; Antwi-Boasiako, 2010). States themselves often engage in practices that produce terror extrajudicial killings, torture, disappearances, and indiscriminate counterinsurgency campaigns. Such actions highlight how counterterrorism can become

politicised, serving regime security rather than citizen protection (OHCHR, 2008; Amani Africa, 2022). Yet global discourses consistently distinguish “legitimate” state violence from “illegitimate” non-state violence, shielding governments from accountability while delegitimising resistance (Shughart, 2006; Black, 2004). This double standard reveals a critical research gap: the blurred boundaries between state and non-state terror in Africa, and how colonial legacies continue to shape them.

The Political Logic of Terrorism

Terrorism is best understood as a form of political communication. As Gunning (2007) argues, terrorist violence is rarely random; it is a communicative act designed to intimidate, demonstrate vulnerability, and compel concessions. Jihadist groups such as Al-Shabaab and Boko Haram exemplify this logic, staging high-profile attacks to maximise fear, disrupt normality, and broadcast political messages beyond immediate victims. This logic is neither new nor irrational. Stohl’s (1979) notion of “elite terrorism” shows how violence can be used strategically to provoke state overreaction or enforce compliance. Tilly (2004) conceptualises terrorism, rebellion, and insurgency as overlapping strategies of contentious politics. Terrorism is thus an “asymmetrical deployment of threats or violence” that both state and non-state actors may employ when conventional political means are blocked or ineffective.

In the African context, this political logic is evident on multiple fronts. Insurgent groups often adopt terrorist tactics such as targeting civilians or symbolic sites when state neglect or repression forecloses legitimate participation. States themselves may cross the line into terrorism when coercion is intended not merely to neutralise threats but to instill widespread fear and maintain control. In both cases, terror functions as coercive bargaining, revealing its essentially political rather than criminal character.

African Historical and Political Contexts

The political uses of terror in Africa cannot be separated from colonial histories. European empires routinely relied on systematic coercion, forced labour, and collective punishment to suppress resistance. In Namibia, the 1904 German *vernichtungsbefehl* against the Herero and Nama has been described as one of the first genocidal campaigns of the twentieth century (Pakenham, 2014). In Kenya, the British repression of the Mau Mau uprising (1952–60) involved mass detention camps, torture, and the forced relocation of more than a million Kikuyu, creating what Elkins (2005) called

a “colonial gulag.” Similarly, during apartheid, the ANC and Umkhonto we Sizwe were officially listed as terrorist organisations by both the South African government and Western powers, with Nelson Mandela remaining on the U.S. terrorist watch list until 2008 (Waxman, 2018).

Colonial authorities consistently weaponised the label “terrorist” against liberation movements, framing resistance as illegitimate violence while legitimising their own coercion. This practice persisted into the postcolonial period, as many African governments inherited repressive security structures and emergency laws that enabled them to suppress dissent with similar tactics (ISS Africa, 2008). Thus, terrorism in Africa today cannot be understood without recognising these continuities: the state itself was historically built through violence and the delegitimisation of oppositional politics.

Terrorism and the African State

The persistence of terrorism in the Sahel, the Lake Chad Basin, and the Horn of Africa is inseparable from the structural weaknesses of the postcolonial African state. Rather than possessing Weber’s monopoly on legitimate violence, many states share coercive authority with non-state actors, vigilante groups, or foreign militaries. In peripheral regions of Mali, Nigeria, and Somalia, jihadist organisations have stepped into governance vacuums by administering justice, collecting taxes, or providing rudimentary welfare (Vines & Wallace, 2021). This hybrid governance reflects what Mamdani (1996) termed the legacy of “decentralised despotism”: colonial bifurcation between urban centres and rural peripheries that persists in postcolonial governance.

Chabal and Daloz (1999) further argue that disorder itself has become a political instrument. Some African elites deliberately manage fragility to attract external security and humanitarian assistance while consolidating domestic authority. This perspective reframes state failure as not merely accidental but at times strategic. Counterterrorism has also become a tool of authoritarian consolidation. In Nigeria, counterinsurgency campaigns against Boko Haram have involved extrajudicial killings, mass detentions, and indiscriminate violence against civilian populations, deepening mistrust rather than resolving underlying grievances (Vines & Wallace, 2021). Ethiopia’s 2006 intervention in Somalia, which was backed by U.S. supported radicalised opposition and entrenched Al-Shabaab rather than eliminating it (Adebajo, 2012). The securitisation of politics, often legitimised by global “War on Terror” discourses, enables regimes

to criminalise dissent by labelling opponents “terrorists,” thereby blurring the line between national security and political control.

Foreign intervention compounds this dynamic. AFRICOM’s expanding footprint, France’s Sahel operations, and Gulf states’ support for rival factions illustrate how African terrorism is entangled with international rivalries (Worcester, 2015). This externalisation of security reinforces the marginalisation of local communities and often intensifies cycles of repression and insurgency.

Decolonial and Indigenous Perspectives on Political Violence

Mainstream terrorism studies remain dominated by Eurocentric frameworks that portray African violence as irrational, tribal, or symptomatic of state failure, abstracted from the continent’s historical trajectories (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013). Decolonial scholars argue that such interpretations reproduce the coloniality of power, the persistence of colonial knowledge structures that present Africa through Western lenses (Mignolo, 2007; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013).

Achille Mbembe (2001) locates the roots of African violence in the colonial and postcolonial state itself, where coercion, exclusion, and the management of death, what he terms necropolitics has remained central to governance. For Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013), the African postcolonial state is a “neo-colony,” formally independent but structurally dependent on external powers and internally reliant on coercion. Within this framework, terrorism is not an aberration but an expression of the contradictions of incomplete sovereignty and contested legitimacy.

Indigenous perspectives further highlight alternative understandings of legitimacy and resistance. Afolabi (2018) argues that in many African societies, legitimacy derives not only from formal institutions but also from community protection, spiritual authority, and reciprocal obligations. Violence labelled as “terrorism” by states or external actors may, within local ontologies, be seen as resistance to illegitimate authority or as an effort to restore disrupted social contracts.

4. Theoretical Framework

This article adopts Critical Terrorism Studies (CTS) and Postcolonial Theory as its primary theoretical anchors. CTS offers the critical entry point by interrogating how “terrorism” is constructed, defined, and mobilised as a political label, while Postcolonial Theory grounds that critique in African historical experiences of colonial domination, epistemic erasure, and struggles for sovereignty. These two frameworks provide the backbone for analysis, situating terrorism not

as an apolitical act of violence but as a contested category deeply entangled with state–society relations and international hierarchies.

Critical Terrorism Studies (CTS) challenges orthodox terrorism scholarship by exposing the political work done by the label “terrorism” (Jackson, 2008; Jarvis, 2024). It highlights how states often apply the term selectively to delegitimise opponents while obscuring their own violence. In the African case, this framework is crucial for examining how both insurgencies and counterterror strategies operate as politics, rather than reducing them to crime or pathology. The CTS insists on analysing state violence alongside non-state violence, recognising that counterterror practices themselves can reproduce insecurity (Shearer, 2020).

Postcolonial Theory sharpens this critique by tracing how colonial and neo-colonial legacies shape contemporary African politics and the framing of violence. It draws attention to the ways liberation struggles were delegitimised as “terrorism,” and how current counterterror regimes reproduce colonial logics by representing African societies as “ungoverned,” unstable, or in need of external management (Mamdani, 1996; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013; Afolabi, 2018). Through situating terrorism discourse within longer histories of domination and resistance, Postcolonial Theory ensures that the analysis foregrounds African agency and historical specificity, resisting Eurocentric universalisation.

Both CTS and Postcolonial Theory provide a coherent and rigorous framework; CTS explains the politics of labeling and securitisation, while Postcolonial Theory situates these processes in Africa’s historical and epistemic context. This dual lens makes it possible to reinterpret terrorism in Africa not simply as security threat, but as a political and historical phenomenon embedded in struggles over legitimacy, sovereignty, and justice.

5. Methodological Orientation

The research adopts a qualitative, interpretivist approach, privileging contextual meanings over universal generalisations. Four cases were purposively selected to capture regional and thematic diversity: Nigeria (Boko Haram and Niger Delta militancy), Somalia (Al-Shabaab), Mali/Sahel (JNIM and ISGS), and Kenya (terrorism in electoral politics). These cases illustrate religious, ethno-political, and resource-driven insurgencies across different regime types and geopolitical settings. Data are drawn from documentary sources: AU and UN communiqués, state counterterrorism strategies, judicial rulings, NGO/think-tank reports, political speeches, academic

scholarship, and regional media. Analysis combines critical discourse analysis of official texts (to uncover how terrorism is defined and securitised) with process tracing to map links between governance breakdowns and insurgent mobilisation. A reflexive stance ensures awareness of researcher positionality and avoids reproducing Eurocentric or state-centric narratives, foregrounding African agency and lived experiences.

6. Terrorism and Politics in Postcolonial African States

Colonial Legacies and Historical Continuities of Terrorism as Delegitimization

Terrorism has long functioned as a politically charged label in Africa, that is rooted in colonial strategies of control. During decolonization, movements like Algeria's FLN were branded terrorists by France, even as they sought liberation from oppressive rule, a classic illustration of contested legitimacy (Fanon, 1963; Ayoob, 2002). The apartheid state and Western allies designated the ANC and Umkhonto we Sizwe as terrorists, with Nelson Mandela included on U.S. watchlists until as late as 2008 (Suttner, 2007; Waxman, 2018). In Zimbabwe, the Rhodesian regime applied similar criminalization tactics against ZANU and ZAPU as anticolonial insurgencies (Martin & Johnson, 1981; Adebajo, 2012). These examples demonstrate how terrorism as a political label served to delegitimize resistance and entrench colonial or settler sovereignty. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013) connects this to the reproduction of epistemic hierarchies that render state violence legitimate while dismissing insurgent violence as irrational.

Contemporary Terrorism as Political Practice

Terrorism in Africa today is far from a monolithic phenomenon; rather, it operates as deliberate political strategy. Boko Haram in northeastern Nigeria emerged from exclusion and inequality, blending Salafist messaging with grievances against state neglect, and positioning itself as a provider of order in stateless spaces (Zenn, 2014; Thurston, 2017). In Somalia, Al-Shabaab capitalized on state collapse by executing high-profile, media-savvy attacks like the Westgate Mall and Manda Bay assaults designed to disrupt and claim political relevance (Anderson & McKnight, 2014; Hansen, 2016). The M23 rebellion in eastern DRC represents a hybrid model of terrorism and insurgency, it targeted UN forces and civilians but was fundamentally oriented toward political bargaining over integration and resources (Stearns, 2013; Vogel, 2014). These groups emerge not from ideological vacuums but from governance failure, state exclusion, or unmet political

promises. Analysis by UNDP shows that economic marginalization and state abuses are primary drivers: 25% of recruits cited unemployment and 71% human rights violations as motivations and then religion ranked third at just over 17% (United Nations, 2023).

State Violence and the Legitimacy Crisis

In many African contexts, the state itself mirrors terrorist tactics through extrajudicial killings, indiscriminate military operations, and repression, undermining its claim to legitimate authority. In Cameroon's Far North, security forces' human rights abuses have evoked distrust mirroring Boko Haram's terror (Amnesty International, 2016; Vines & Wallace, 2021). In Ethiopia's Tigray conflict, federal forces have been accused of massacres, starvation tactics, and shelling civilian areas actions branded war crimes by the Human Rights Watch (Human Rights Watch, 2021; Getachew, 2025). In central Mali, state and Russian-linked forces have been implicated in summary executions, which has further tarnished the government's legitimacy and reinforcing jihadist narratives of moral authority (Le Monde, 2022; Bøås, 2015). Civilian casualties are staggering across conflict zones. In the Sahel, more than 2,000 civilians were killed in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso in the first half of 2022 alone, doubling previous annual figures (Rédaction Africanews & AFP, 2024). In the broader Sahel 1990–2024, over 11,000 civilian deaths occurred in Mali alone, with violent extremist incidents skyrocketing post-2020 following the Wagner deployment (Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2025). JNIM, a potent al-Qaeda affiliate, is advancing territorially from rural guerrilla operations to strategic encirclement of capitals with reported over 850 civilian deaths in recent attacks (Chason & Blanco Ramos, 2025).

7. Case Studies from Key African Regions

West Africa: Nigeria, Lake Chad, and the Niger Delta

The Boko Haram insurgency, and its splinter group the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), continues to devastate northeastern Nigeria and the wider Lake Chad Basin. In early September 2025, an attack on the Darul Jamal community in Borno State killed at least 60 civilians and displaced over 100 residents, highlighting the persistent insecurity facing returnees from IDP camps (Umar, Shibayan, & Banchereau, 2025). Earlier the same year, 57 villagers were massacred in Borno, accused of collaborating with ISWAP fighters (Adebayo, 2025). Such incidents underscore why the region remains one of the deadliest theatres of asymmetric conflict worldwide.

The drivers of recruitment into Boko Haram and ISWAP remain deeply socio-economic. UNDP's multi-country survey across the Sahel and Horn of Africa found that 25% of former extremists joined because of unemployment, 40% due to urgent livelihood needs, while 71% cited human rights abuses by state forces as their primary motivation (United Nations, 2023). In northeastern Nigeria alone, UNICEF (2023) estimates that 1.3 million children in Borno and Yobe States have been displaced, with many lacking access to education, conditions that Boko Haram exploits to expand its ranks. Amnesty International (2025) further reported that in Baga, more than 40 farmers and fishermen were summarily executed by insurgents, demonstrating the brutal governance Boko Haram exerts in contested rural areas.

Nigeria's counterinsurgency has relied heavily on militarization, including extrajudicial killings, arbitrary detention, and scorched-earth tactics. Amnesty International (2022) revealed that thousands of civilians remain detained under inhumane conditions in Giwa barracks, often without trial. In 2023, a Borno State court ordered the release of 313 detainees for lack of evidence (Reuters, 2024), reinforcing concerns about due process violations. Meanwhile, local defense militias such as the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF) have supplemented the army's efforts. While initially effective in reclaiming territories, CJTF members have also been implicated in sexual abuse, extortion, and forced recruitment of children (Okereke et al., 2016). These overlapping authorities erode Weber's principle of the state's monopoly of violence, producing what scholars term "hybrid governance" (Vines & Wallace, 2021).

The humanitarian consequences are staggering. In states such as Benue, Plateau, and Zamfara, jihadi and bandit violence have caused over 10,200 deaths and displaced more than 450,000 people within two years (Amnesty International, 2025; AFP, 2025). Across the Lake Chad Basin, millions remain dependent on aid, while girls and women rescued from Boko Haram captivity often face stigmatization, indefinite detention, or lack of reintegration support, reflecting both post-crisis neglect and state complicity (Amnesty International, 2025).

Although geographically distinct, insurgency in the Niger Delta mirrors northeastern Nigeria in its political character. Militancy, oil bunkering, and piracy are not merely criminal activities but are often articulated as resistance against environmental degradation, inequality, and exclusion from oil wealth (Ikelegbe, 2005). Groups such as the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) framed their campaigns around resource control and anti-state legitimacy, while later formations like the Niger Delta Avengers revived attacks on oil infrastructure when structural

grievances remained unaddressed (ICG, 2021). The 2009 amnesty program briefly reduced violence but failed to dismantle entrenched corruption or elite predation, illustrating the cyclical nature of insurgency in Nigeria.

The Sahel: Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger

The Sahel has emerged as one of the world's most lethal zones for civilians. According to Birru (2023), Burkina Faso alone recorded over 6,000 civilian deaths in the first eight months of 2023, the highest toll since the conflict began. Across the wider region of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, more than 11,000 civilians were killed between 2012 and 2022 (Rédaction Africanews & AFP, 2024). In Mali's southern regions, jihadist insurgents staged coordinated assaults that left between 77 and 100 people dead in a single day, disrupting humanitarian supply lines and forcing aid agencies to suspend operations (Egbejule & Agencies, 2024). The displacement crisis is equally dire. In Burkina Faso, jihadist attacks increased fivefold between 2018 and 2023, forcing over 2 million people from their homes (UNHCR, 2023). Niger has seen over 700,000 internally displaced persons, while Mali accounts for another 400,000, compounding food insecurity in a region already stressed by climate shocks and desertification (UNHCR, 2023). These figures reflect how armed groups exploit structural vulnerabilities, resource scarcity, ethnic rivalries, and marginalization to entrench their control.

Insurgency in the Sahel is not purely ideological but embedded in local socio-political fractures. Groups such as Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM), an al-Qaeda affiliate, and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) finance themselves through taxation, smuggling, and control of trade routes, effectively creating parallel governance structures (Bøås, 2015; Chason & Blanco Ramos, 2025). Estimates suggest JNIM commands tens of thousands of fighters, enabling it to dominate rural zones and extract resources while undermining state authority.

The erosion of state capacity has been accelerated by political instability. Mali has witnessed three coups in less than a decade (2012, 2020, 2021), while Burkina Faso experienced two in 2022 alone, and Niger succumbed to a military coup in 2023. Each transition has been justified on promises of restoring security, yet violence has continued to escalate, exposing the limits of juntas as counterinsurgency actors (ICG, 2023).

Foreign interventions have further complicated governance. France's Operation Serval (2013) and later Barkhane (2014–2022) temporarily disrupted jihadist networks but came to be perceived as neo-colonial occupations, fueling public resentment (Worcester, 2015; Wing, 2022). After

France's withdrawal in 2022, Mali turned to the Russian Wagner Group. Their involvement has been linked to atrocities such as the Moura massacre, where more than 300 civilians were executed in March 2022 under the pretext of anti-terror operations (HRW, 2022). Rather than stabilizing, these militarized approaches have created zones of hybrid authority, where jihadists, juntas, foreign mercenaries, ethnic militias, and traditional chiefs compete for power.

Burkina Faso epitomizes this dynamic; escalating jihadist violence, coupled with state neglect, provoked mass protests and elite fractures that culminated in two coups in 2022. The ruling junta now claims legitimacy through security provision, but the continuation of large-scale attacks shows that counterterrorism remains reactive, authoritarian, and disconnected from local grievances (ICG, 2023). Niger which once was considered the linchpin of Western counterterror efforts in the Sahel, illustrates the fragility of externally dependent regimes. Its 2023 coup not only severed ties with France and the United States but also revealed a growing regional backlash against external military reliance.

East Africa: Somalia and Kenya

Al-Shabaab remains one of Africa's most enduring insurgent movements, evolving into a parallel governance authority across large swathes of rural Somalia. Emerging from the Islamic Courts Union after Ethiopia's U.S.-backed 2006 invasion, the group expanded by exploiting resentment toward foreign occupation (Anderson & McKnight, 2015). It levies taxes on trade, livestock, and even humanitarian aid convoys, with the UN estimating its annual revenue at over \$100 million (Williams, 2023). Al-Shabaab adjudicates disputes, enforces Sharia, and provides limited services, positioning itself as a shadow state in areas where Mogadishu's reach is absent (Hansen, 2019).

Despite more than 15 years of counterinsurgency operations, the group retains significant territorial control. The African Union Mission (AMISOM, now ATMIS) has lost over 3,500 troops since its deployment in 2007 (ICG, 2023). U.S. airstrikes, numbering over 280 between 2016 and 2020, have killed high-ranking militants but also caused hundreds of civilian deaths, according to Amnesty International (2020). Such collateral damage strengthens Al-Shabaab's framing of the Somali government and its allies as foreign-backed aggressors, eroding state legitimacy and fueling recruitment.

The humanitarian consequences are immense. Somalia is home to 3.8 million internally displaced persons (IDPs), many uprooted by Al-Shabaab violence and counterterror offensives (International Organization for Migration, 2023). The group also disrupts humanitarian access: in 2022, it

attacked aid convoys delivering famine relief during the Horn of Africa drought, exacerbating a crisis in which 7.8 million Somalis almost half the population require humanitarian assistance (UNHCR, 2023).

Kenya illustrates how terrorism has been both a genuine threat and a tool for political instrumentalization. Al-Shabaab's cross-border attacks include the 2013 Westgate Mall siege, which killed 67 civilians, and the 2015 Garissa University massacre, where 148 students were executed one of the deadliest terrorist incidents in Kenyan history (Anderson & McKnight, 2014; Hansen, 2016). More recently, Al-Shabaab claimed responsibility for the 2020 Manda Bay attack, which killed three U.S. and Kenyan personnel, highlighting the group's ability to strike symbolic international targets.

These attacks have had profound political consequences. Kenyan elites have leveraged the threat of terrorism to expand state surveillance and centralize authority. The 2014 Operation Usalama Watch led to the detention of more than 4,000 Somali refugees and Kenyan Muslims, often without trial, under the guise of counterterrorism (European Union Agency for Asylum, 2025). Human Rights Watch (2018) documented widespread abuses, including extrajudicial killings by Kenya's Anti-Terror Police Unit. Such measures reinforced Al-Shabaab's narrative of Muslim persecution, deepening mistrust between the state and marginalized communities in the northeast.

At the same time, terrorism discourses have been deployed during election cycles to delegitimize opponents and justify securitization. Analysts note that counterterror budgets ballooned by nearly 300% between 2011 and 2018, yet much of the funding was diverted through corrupt patronage networks (The Associated Press, 2025). While Kenya undoubtedly faces real insecurity, its counterterror responses often reveal how states instrumentalize terrorism to consolidate power at the expense of civil liberties and intercommunal trust.

8. Towards a Decolonial Reframing of Terrorism and Politics in Africa

The prevailing global discourse on terrorism is overwhelmingly shaped by Western epistemological and political frameworks that often obscure, distort, or erase African experiences and perspectives. Advancing a more just and accurate understanding of terrorism in Africa requires developing decolonial approaches that foreground African histories, ontologies, and political realities. Decolonial analysis does not merely replace Eurocentric definitions with African ones; it

fundamentally interrogates who has the authority to define terrorism, whose violence is rendered visible, and whose suffering is rendered illegible in dominant global narratives.

Western definitions of terrorism have historically emerged from the logic of empire and the interests of powerful states, constructing a narrative that delegitimizes non-state violence while shielding state-perpetrated violence from scrutiny. The global “War on Terror,” rooted in post-9/11 security paradigms, has exported these definitions to Africa through military partnerships, counterterrorism training, and donor-driven policy frameworks. These interventions often reproduce colonial logics, portraying African regions as inherently unstable and violent, requiring external oversight.

This epistemic framing obscures structural violence within postcolonial states, neglects the historical trauma of colonial conquest, and depoliticizes insurgencies that often emerge in response to dispossession, exclusion, or repression. As scholars such as Walter D. Mignolo (2011) and Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013) argue, coloniality persists in the production of knowledge, with Western categories treated as universal and non-Western perspectives silenced or pathologized. Decolonial scholarship seeks to provincialize Eurocentric epistemologies and reclaim African agency in defining and interpreting political violence.

A decolonial reframing requires embedding terrorism analysis in local political, historical, and social contexts. Violence should be understood relative to lived experiences of marginalization, state failure, and contested legitimacy, rather than as irrational expressions of religious zeal or tribal conflict. For instance, Boko Haram’s emergence is inseparable from the colonial-era neglect of northern Nigeria, neoliberal economic marginalization, and abuses by state security forces. Jihadist expansion in the Sahel cannot be reduced to global ideological currents; it reflects local conflicts over land, ethnicity, and political autonomy within postcolonial states that have persistently failed to ensure justice or inclusion.

African societies possess long-standing traditions of conflict resolution, community-based justice, and political negotiation that predate modern state institutions. These indigenous modalities offer critical frameworks for interpreting how violence functions and how legitimacy is contested and negotiated. A decolonial approach thus views violence not solely as disorder, but as part of a broader political process in which marginalized groups seek to renegotiate their position within the political community. This perspective demands analytical humility and attentiveness to voices typically excluded from elite policy or academic discourse. Militarized counterterrorism strategies

in Africa often fail to curb violence and may exacerbate cycles of repression, exclusion, and mistrust. Through framing terrorism as an existential threat, states often backed by foreign powers have securitized dissent and criminalized opposition, echoing colonial strategies of control where resistance was met with disproportionate force.

Decolonial praxis calls for a paradigm shift: from securitization to strategies grounded in justice, inclusion, and dialogue. Addressing terrorism requires confronting structural inequalities and historical grievances that underpin cycles of violence. This entails investing in democratic participation, restoring community governance mechanisms, promoting equitable development, and ensuring accountability for both state and non-state actors. Justice is political as much as legal: it recognizes the legitimacy of popular grievances, opens spaces for negotiation, and reconstructs state-citizen relations on trust and reciprocity rather than coercion. Dialogue must be reclaimed as a legitimate governance tool, acknowledging the humanity and agency of those deemed adversaries of the state.

Decolonizing counterterrorism in Africa involves transforming the very frameworks through which violence is understood. It demands epistemic justice, the right of African peoples to define their realities, shape their futures, and govern the narratives that affect their lives. Only through such a transformation can the continent advance toward a peaceful, equitable, and genuinely decolonized political order.

9. Conclusion and Policy Reflections

This study has critically examined terrorism in Africa through a historically grounded, theoretically plural, and decolonial lens. Moving beyond dominant narratives that frame terrorism solely as religious extremism, irrational violence, or criminality, it demonstrates that political violence across Africa is deeply embedded in historical marginalization, contested statehood, and struggles over legitimacy. From the insurgencies of the Lake Chad Basin and the Sahel to hybrid governance zones in Somalia and eastern DRC, the persistence of violence is inseparable from structural conditions, including colonial legacies, postcolonial authoritarianism, weak institutions, and longstanding grievances over access to justice, political representation, and resources.

Central to this analysis is the insight that terrorism cannot be effectively addressed without considering political history and state–society relations. The postcolonial African state, shaped by extractive governance, bifurcated authority structures, and inherited violence, has frequently failed

to ensure inclusive citizenship and accountable governance. These governance vacuums allow non-state actors not merely to destroy order but to contest and sometimes replace it. State responses grounded in militarized counterterrorism, when detached from legitimacy and accountability, often reproduce the coercion they aim to eliminate, which further erodes trust and exacerbating cycles of violence.

A historically and decolonially informed perspective highlights that terrorism in Africa is not an isolated threat but a symptom of deeper political fractures, requiring approaches that prioritize justice, inclusion, and the restoration of legitimate authority. Addressing these dynamics demands strategies that are operationally specific, context-sensitive, and capable of balancing security with accountability, justice, and community trust.

10. Recommendations

To translate these insights into actionable strategies, policymakers should adopt a multi-tiered framework:

1. Community-Based Conflict Resolution: Policymakers should establish local peace councils, traditional justice forums, and intercommunity dialogue committees to mediate disputes and provide participatory decision-making channels. These mechanisms offer early avenues for addressing grievances that insurgent groups exploit. For example, in Mali and Burkina Faso, intercommunity dialogue committees have successfully mediated land and resource disputes, reducing youth recruitment into jihadist movements by providing locally legitimate platforms for negotiation and reconciliation.

2. Reform Counterterrorism Legislation: Governments must introduce clear legal safeguards distinguishing political dissent from violent extremism. Transparent trial procedures and limitations on prolonged detention without evidence are essential to uphold human rights while maintaining security. Ghana and Senegal provide instructive examples, where judicial oversight reforms have strengthened compliance with human rights standards in security operations, demonstrating that legal frameworks can simultaneously enhance accountability and operational effectiveness.

3. Hybrid Governance and Local Inclusion: Non-state community authorities should be integrated into formal governance structures through consultative councils that co-manage security, development, and dispute resolution. Somalia's semi-autonomous regions illustrate this approach, where partnerships with local administrations have increased accountability, improved

service delivery, and reduced insurgent recruitment, showing that inclusive governance mitigates the appeal of non-state armed actors.

4. Socio-Economic and Environmental Interventions: Structural drivers of insurgency, including unemployment, inequitable resource distribution, and environmental degradation, must be systematically addressed through targeted development programs. In the Niger Delta, post-amnesty programs combined vocational training with local governance initiatives, successfully reducing youth recidivism into militancy. Such programs demonstrate that socio-economic inclusion and resource equity can diminish incentives for engaging in political violence.

5. Regional Coordination and Oversight: Strengthening the African Union (AU), ECOWAS, and IGAD frameworks is critical to monitor counterterrorism interventions, ensure civilian protection, and promote political solutions alongside military measures. Early-warning systems like ACLED can enable preventive diplomacy and conflict forecasting, allowing states to prioritize mediation over reactive force. Effective regional coordination also facilitates shared intelligence, cross-border security planning, and adherence to human rights norms.

6. Promotion of Justice and Political Dialogue: Structured political dialogues between governments and marginalized groups should be prioritized, emphasizing accountability for both state and non-state violence. Restorative justice initiatives, including reparations, truth-telling processes, and reintegration programs for former combatants, are essential to rebuilding trust and addressing historical grievances. Implementing these mechanisms ensures that responses to terrorism go beyond repression, creating space for sustainable political inclusion and long-term stability.

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