

Counter-Terrorism and State Fragility in Sub-Saharan Africa

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Abstract- The global terrorist hotspot Sub-Saharan Africa's intricate nexus between counter-terrorism and state instability is examined in this research. A rigorous secondary assessment of 2015–2025 studies from throughout the continent illustrates how governance lapses allow terrorist groups to operate, how counter-terrorism operations affect state fragility, and how to create more sustainable methods. The spatial Security Complex and Postcolonial State Theory explored the terrorism-fragility nexus's geographical, political, organisational, institutional, and historical aspects. State fragility and counter-terrorism may exacerbate terrorism, according to the research. JNIM, Al-Shabaab, and Islamic State affiliates exploit institutional weakness, political instability, systemic corruption, and legitimacy gaps. This entity's taxation, dispute settlement, and services offer governance alternatives in countries lacking or exploitative states. Military counter-terrorism is threatened by rebel rule. Regional Security Complex Theory states that security challenges are regional and require regional solutions, however the G5 Sahel Joint Force and Multinational Joint Task Force have political and operational constraints. Securitisation Theory justified extreme measures that undermine states by presenting terrorism as an existential danger. Outside military activities generate "rented sovereignty," while "counter-terrorism coup cycles" have taken over Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. Nigeria's Operation Safe Corridor, Kenya's National Strategy, and Kaduna State show that deradicalisation, community participation, and economic growth work. The study recommended that in order to adequately fight terrorism, states must compete with rebel administrations to provide security, justice, and services to all inhabitants. African governments, regional organisations, foreign partners, civil society, and future researchers should prioritise African views and root causes and symptoms.

Keywords: counter-terrorism, state fragility, sub-saharan africa, sahel, regional security, rebel governance

I. INTRODUCTION

The convergence of counter-terrorism efforts and state fragility in Sub-Saharan Africa stands as one of the most urgent and complex security issues of the twenty-first century. As the continent has emerged as what some scholars term the "epicentre of global terrorism" (Varin & Abubakar, 2025, p. 2), the responses to this threat are increasingly influencing—and being influenced by—the foundational weaknesses of the states they aim to protect. This analysis investigates the ways in which state fragility fosters environments conducive to the growth of terrorist groups, delves into the intricate dynamics of counter-terrorism initiatives in these settings, and reflects on the significant consequences for African sovereignty and governance.

The connection between fragile state structures and the emergence of violent extremism is particularly clear in the Sahel and Horn of Africa regions. State fragility in this context appears through various interconnected dimensions: institutional weakness that prevents governments from providing consistent services, especially in rural regions; political instability marked by over twenty-five successful coups since 1960; systemic corruption that misallocates counter-terrorism funding; and the decline of state legitimacy (Mkandawire, 2023, pp. 45-48). These governance failures result in what analysts refer to as "security vacuums"—ungoverned or under-governed areas where terrorist groups can set up alternative systems of control. Groups like the Islamic State Sahel Province (ISSP) and Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimeen (JNIM) have significantly taken advantage of these circumstances, growing from a few hundred fighters in 2018 to

several thousand by 2025. The Sahel region now represents more than half of all terrorism-related fatalities worldwide (Institute for Economics and Peace, 2025, p. 34).

The complexity of this relationship lies in the fact that terrorist organisations in fragile states do not merely take advantage of the lack of governance; they also work to create alternatives actively. In instances where governments have not succeeded in establishing the rule of law, extremist groups have taken it upon themselves to implement their own systems for taxation, resolving disputes, and providing services. JNIM, for example, has been noted for addressing land disputes and penalising livestock theft in central Mali, providing communities with harsh yet effective alternatives to the lack of state presence or oppressive military actions (Thurston, 2024, pp. 112-115). This dynamic fundamentally questions traditional counter-terrorism strategies that emphasise kinetic operations rather than the restoration of governance.

The response to these threats in counter-terrorism has become intertwined with issues of state fragility. International interventions, including French-led operations, American drone strikes, and European Union training missions, have yielded mixed outcomes. Although they were initially effective in thwarting terrorist progress, these externally imposed security frameworks have frequently unwittingly intensified the very vulnerabilities they aimed to mitigate. The departure of French forces from Mali in 2022, along with diminished Western involvement throughout the Sahel, resulted in security voids that militant groups swiftly took advantage of (Charbonneau, 2024, p. 78). Moreover, the framework of donor-funded security assistance has led to what some analysts refer to as "rented sovereignty"—a situation in which African governments rely on external funding, planning, and doctrine, thereby hindering the natural growth of domestic institutional capacity (Fisher & Anderson, 2023, p. 156).

This reliance reveals itself in concerning manners. In Somalia, two decades of internationally funded peace operations have resulted in parallel security

structures. Soldiers rely on international donors for their salaries instead of their own treasury, ministries struggle to plan medium-term budgets, and parliaments are unable to scrutinise expenditures (Ingiriis, 2024, pp. 201-204). The Sahel presents a contrasting narrative: a significant foreign presence has redirected strategic authority, resulting in Malian leaders ceding control over both operational pace and political legitimacy. In less than ten years of focused counter-terrorism collaboration, uniforms supplanted ballots in Bamako, Ouagadougou, and Niamey, with each coup rationalised through the discourse of counter-terrorism (Guichaoua, 2023, p. 89). Armies that were trained and equipped as essential Western allies redirected their enhanced capabilities inward, taking control from civilian leaders who were considered incapable of providing security within donor-dependent structures.

The humanitarian impact of the connection between terrorism and state fragility has been catastrophic. In the last ten years, around 150,000 individuals have lost their lives in conflicts linked to Islamic extremist groups throughout Africa (ACLED, 2025, p. 12). According to United Nations reports, there are over three million internally displaced persons in the Sahel, as families escape violence, starvation, and attacks from armed factions (UNHCR, 2024, p. 23). Children and adolescents are increasingly being exploited, with reports from some Islamist-related camps indicating that nearly 60 percent of residents are minors, many of whom are traumatised or coerced into service (Save the Children, 2024, p. 8). This continues a cycle of violence, as generations are raised in war zones devoid of traditional community structures or educational opportunities.

Recent academic work on this subject has advanced considerably, providing detailed insights into the complex interactions between internal and external factors that play a role in the emergence and continuation of terrorism in Africa. Recent comprehensive works, including the Palgrave Handbook of Terrorism in Africa (Varin & Abubakar, 2025) and Terrorism and Counter-terrorism in Modern Sub-Saharan Africa (Strydom & Dwyer, 2024), offer detailed country-specific and regional analyses that explore the intersections of

historical legacies, governance failures, and international dynamics. These studies highlight the importance of viewing terrorism in Africa not merely as a standalone security issue but as intricately linked to larger themes of state-building, development, and international power dynamics.

The rise of alternative, non-kinetic strategies in counter-terrorism presents promising avenues that extend beyond the confines of solely military solutions. Initiatives like Nigeria's Operation Safe Corridor, offering deradicalisation and reintegration programmes for repentant Boko Haram members, and Kenya's National Strategy to Counter Violent Extremism, which emphasises community policing and youth empowerment, demonstrate an increasing awareness that lasting solutions need to tackle underlying issues (Botha, 2023, pp. 267-269). Regional examples such as Kaduna State's innovative non-kinetic model—utilizing dialogue, community engagement, and economic empowerment—indicate that integrating military efforts with soft power strategies can promote more sustainable peace (Olojo, 2024, p. 142).

II. CONCEPTUALISING STATE FRAGILITY AND TERRORISM

Modern scholarship has evolved beyond straightforward state failure to more sophisticated understandings of how governance inadequacies enable terrorist groups. Hameiri (2007, quoted in Edet et al., 2024) challenges the "failed states" model, saying that institutionalist approaches obfuscate political forces behind state incapacity. Recent African security studies highlights that fragility has several dimensions, including institutional weakness, political instability, systemic corruption, and diminished state legitimacy (Mkandawire, 2023).

The Palgrave Handbook of Terrorism in Africa, edited by Gunaratna and Okereke (2025), is the most comprehensive recent study of "the intricate interplay of internal and external forces that contribute to the genesis and perpetuation of terrorist activities in Africa" (p. 4). The handbook's regional organization—Central, East, North, Southern, and

West Africa—shows how fragility emerges differently but shares fundamental aspects. The handbook's analysis of colonial institutional heritage and post-independence governance trajectories' effects on extremism is particularly important.

Minka and Opeyeoluwa (2023) argue that "terrorism festering in the Sahel is a product of bad governance and the inability of the states within the sphere of influence to exert the needed political will and corresponding action" (p. 40). They use Regional Security Complex Theory to show how state-level governance failures cascade across borders, producing linked security issues that defy unilateral remedies. This regional perspective helps explain why Sahel terrorist groups like ISSP and JNIM have grown from a few hundred fighters in 2018 to several thousand by 2025 (Institute for Economics & Peace, 2024).

III. TERRORIST GOVERNANCE AND THE EXPLOITATION OF STATE ABSENCE

A major contribution to the research is how terrorist organisations in weak nations actively create governance alternatives. A convincing argument is made by Edet, Edet, and Confidence (2024) about military governments and rebel governance in the Sahel. They show how "the proliferation of these regimes hastens the ascent of these states to 'state failure-hood' as they legitimise 'rebel governance' exemplified by violent extremist organisations" in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger (Edet et al., 2024, p. 2). Their "securitisation of peace" thesis shows how military interventions that prioritise security over governance reinforce the groups they seek to destroy. This analysis draws from rebel governance theory. Albert (2022), Cunningham and Loyle (2021), and Loyle et al. (2022) used conceptual frameworks to explain how rebel groups form taxation, dispute resolution, and service supply systems. Edet et al. (2024) demonstrate how JNIM and related groups have resolved property disputes, punished livestock theft, and provided rudimentary justice in the Sahel where governmental power is absent or predatory.

From the Horn of Africa, Adan and Oluteyo (2025) show how Al-Shabaab exploits governance

inadequacies in Kenya-Somalia borders. According to their study of 313 respondents from Mandera (Kenya) and Bulahawo (Somalia), "institutional mistrust, overlapping jurisdictions, and persistent socio-economic marginalisation curtail the impact of bilateral counter-terrorism efforts" (Adan & Oluteyo, 2025, p. 1153). Moreover, they show how "these structural weaknesses enable militant groups to occupy governance gaps by providing rudimentary security, justice, and welfare functions in areas where the state presence remains limited" (p. 1155). Military pressure alone cannot defeat terrorist groups that provide services that states cannot supply, according to this conclusion.

IV. THE COUNTER-TERRORISM RESPONSE: PARADOXES AND CONSEQUENCES

A lot of research investigates the contradictory effects of counter-terrorism in unstable African regimes. Minko (2025) asks "To what extent do political turmoil and coups d'état contribute to the proliferation and resilience of terrorist groups?" in the Sahel. (p. 1). The study shows that "periods of governance vacuum and instability create fertile ground for extremist ideologies to take root" (Minko, 2025, p. 3) and that counter-terrorism operations can produce political instability that allows terrorist proliferation.

Critical attention is given to external intervention. Charbonneau (2024) analyses French military actions in the Sahel from Serval to Barkhane and argues that externally driven security systems typically worsen fragilities. According to interventionism critics, the 2022 French pullout from Mali and diminished Western engagement in the region created security holes that militant organisations quickly seized (Erforth, 2018). Fisher and Anderson (2023) talk about "rented sovereignty," how African countries grow dependent on external financing, planning, and doctrine, eroding native institutional capability.

The security consequences of this dependency are significant. Ingiriis (2024) examines the Somali case, showing how two decades of internationally funded peace operations have created parallel security structures where soldiers depend on international

donors rather than their own treasury, ministries cannot plan medium-term budgets, and parliaments cannot assess expenditures. Guichaoua (2023) describes "the counter-terrorism coup cycle" in West Africa, where armies trained and equipped as indispensable Western partners took power from civilian leaders deemed unable to provide security under donor-dependent frameworks. This led to counter-terrorism-justified coups in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger between 2020 and 2023.

V. THE EMERGENCE OF NON-KINETIC APPROACHES

Scholars and practitioners have increasingly pushed for non-kinetic techniques to address extremism's fundamental causes due to military-centric strategies' limitations. Chilaka et al. (2024, quoted in Administratio Publica, 2025) evaluate West African non-kinetic tactics for community participation, economic empowerment, and counter-radicalization. "Success stories from Niger, Mali, and Nigeria" show effectiveness "in reducing recruitment, building community resilience, and fostering socioeconomic development" (Administratio Publica, 2025, p. 1).

Non-kinetic techniques are based on securitisation theory, particularly Buzan, Waever, and de Wilde (1998) and Waever (1995, 2015). According to Adan and Oluteyo (2025), sustainable counter-terrorism requires "a paradigm shift away from heavily militarised approaches toward human-security-oriented models that integrate community resilience, coordinated cross-border intelligence, and development-focused diplomacy" (p. 1155). This supports security-development compacts that restore state legitimacy in marginalised regions.

Scholars have studied certain programs. Haruna (2022, referenced in Administratio Publica, 2025) investigates Nigeria's "Operation Safe Corridor," which offers psychiatric counselling, religious education, and skills training to repentant Boko Haram members. Kenya's National Strategy to Counter Violent Extremism prioritises community policing and youth empowerment, according to Botha (2023). Olojo (2024) assesses Kaduna State's innovative non-kinetic peacebuilding program, which

uses discussion, community participation, and economic empowerment. These studies imply that military-soft power combinations are more sustainable than kinetic operations alone.

However, the literature also notes major implementation issues. Administratio Publica (2025) states that "inadequate funding, systemic corruption, and societal mistrust hinder their widespread implementation and success" (p. 2). Regional and international frameworks—including ECOWAS, the AU, and the UN—have tried to combine military and non-military measures, but "their success is often undermined by logistical constraints, misaligned priorities, and insufficient funding" (p. 3).

VI. POLITICAL WILL, POWER, AND POLICY IMPLEMENTATION

Recent literature emphasises political will's impact in counter-terrorism. According to Folarin, Iyoha, and Onah (2025), "political will may limit state power in tackling new security threats in Sub-Saharan Africa," since "military power or capacity is significantly enhanced or limited by the political action of leaders" (p. 5). They conclude from literature study that "proactive political action and a comprehensive approach" are needed due to "the complex nature of the situation" (Folarin et al., 2025, p. 6).

The most extensive study on Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) in Nigeria is Okengwu (2024)'s PhD thesis. Using Kashwan's power in institutions matrix to separate "overt, agenda, and ideational power," the study found three main findings. Then "external and internationally driven CVE agendas are co-opted by state actors at a policy level, but that this adoption is relatively shallow and characterised by isomorphic mimicry" (Okengwu, 2024). 2nd, "CVE policy and practice is shaped by a set of actors embedded in existing patronage relationships that strategically excludes other actors" (p. 2). 3 "blame for the failure of CVE is widely understood as a lack of 'political willingness' to take action, but the deeper complexity of the roots and structural drivers of conflict go beyond the ability of the state institutions and actors to directly control them" (p. v).

It relates to arguments concerning how less dominating governments respond to international agendas. Okengwu (2024) shows that "patterns of exclusion based on patronage is complex and comprehensive and transcends the notes in literature on the exclusion of CSO, religious and ethnic groups" (p. v). The research adds to postcolonial literature (Ekeh, 1975; Chabal & Daloz, 1999) by showing how complex political dynamics, often called political will, stifle CVE implementation, weaken resilience to violent extremism, and inadvertently radicalise and mobilise.

VII. REGIONAL COOPERATION AND SECURITY ARCHITECTURE

Transnational terrorist concerns in Sub-Saharan Africa have drawn academic attention to regional security cooperation. Minko (2025) investigates "initiatives like the G5 Sahel Joint Force and the Lake Chad Basin Commission Multinational Joint Task Force in countering terrorism" (p. 4) and finds that cross-border collaboration is necessary but limited by politics and operations Önal and Oumar (2021) analyse G5 Sahel policies and security initiatives, revealing the gap between institutional design and implementation capacity.

The Kenya-Somalia scenario reviewed by Adan and Oluteyo (2025) shows the need and complexity of bilateral collaboration. Despite moderate operational efficacy, "institutional mistrust, overlapping jurisdictions, and persistent socio-economic marginalisation" (p. 1153) hinder collaboration. They conclude that long-term peace "depends on transforming Kenya-Somalia cooperation from a predominantly military undertaking into a security-development compact capable of restoring state legitimacy in borderland regions" (p. 1155).

Minka and Opeyeoluwa (2023) discuss "how despondency results when regional intervention are not implemented" using Regional Security Complex Theory (p. 40). They argue that Sahelian security issues are interrelated and demand a "overhaul of broader regional intervention as a matter of urgency, especially where state cannot tackle the security implications" (p. 41). The research underlines that no

single state can manage transnational terrorist threats alone, while regional organisations are underfunded and politically limited.

VIII. HUMANITARIAN DIMENSIONS AND CIVILIAN IMPACT

Finally, literature discusses the humanitarian effects of the terrorism-fragility nexus. ACLED (2025) reports 150,000 Islamic extremist-related deaths in Africa during the past decade. In the Sahel, UNHCR (2024) reports nearly three million internally displaced families fleeing conflict, famine, and armed faction attacks. According to Save the Children (2024), approximately 60% of Islamist-related camps' occupants are children, often traumatised or forced into work.

In locations where armed organisations restrict access to populations, well-intentioned humanitarian help might bolster extremist groups, according to Pérouse de Montclos (2021). This analysis shows the ethical and operational challenges humanitarian actors face in conflict zones when combatants and civilians, service delivery and resource diversion blur.

IX. REGIONAL SECURITY COMPLEX THEORY

One of the biggest contributions to post-Cold War international security studies is Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT). The 2003 work *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security* by Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver provides a systematic framework for understanding regional security dynamics, challenging state-centric and globalist approaches that dominated Cold War scholarship (Buzan & Wæver, 2003). RSCT's theoretical foundations, key principles, application to Sub-Saharan Africa, and relevance to understanding modern security concerns like terrorism, state fragility, and regional cooperation are examined in this review.

RSCT was founded on the idea that traditional International Relations theory overemphasised global dynamics and ignored regional patterns that govern most security interactions. With the end of the Cold

War bipolar framework, Buzan and Wæver (2003) assert that regional security dynamics gained autonomy and importance. The idea fills a basic gap: whereas dangers spread more easily over short distances and nations are geographically close, global security analysis had centred on great power politics. RSCT is based on the Copenhagen School's securitisation framework, which frames security as a social construct resulting from speech acts framing issues as existential threats requiring extraordinary measures (Buzan, Wæver, & de Wilde, 1998). Regionally, RSCT examines how securitisation and desecuritisation trends cluster spatially to create various security formations.

According to RSCT, security interdependencies generate regional patterns that make it impossible to understand one state's security challenges without considering its neighbours. According to Buzan and Wæver (2003), a Regional Security Complex (RSC) is a group of interconnected units with complex securitisation and desecuritization processes that cannot be solved separately (p. 44). Several key factors make up this definition. Security dynamics matter for states, terrorist groups, insurgent movements, and international organisations. RSCT differs from neorealist models that only consider governments as security actors by including nonstate actors. Security concerns arise from securitisation processes, which vary by region and include military threats, identity issues, economic vulnerabilities, and environmental issues. Regional security is interlinked because geographical proximity, historical linkages, and patterns of amity and enmity affect the security of each unit in the complex.

Each of RSCT's four analytical stages contributes to security. Individual governments' internal security dynamics include state-society ties, regime security, and domestic disputes. Domestic insecurity, caused by state fragility, governance inadequacies, and internal conflicts, is especially significant in Sub-Saharan Africa (Mkandawire, 2023). Regional security interdependence among units within a geographically grouped set of states is the fundamental focus of RSCT—distinctive forms from sustained security interaction among neighbours. The interregional level addresses security dynamics

between RSCs, particularly boundary regions where complexes meet and interact, such the Horn of Africa. While RSCT prioritises regional autonomy, it accepts that global powers—the US, China, Russia—continue to enter and alter regional dynamics (Fisher & Anderson, 2023).

Buzan and Wæver (2003) identify optimum RSC types based on structure and dynamics. Standard RSCs include two or more poles (power centres) and a clear pattern of security interdependence, like in the Middle East with Israel, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey. In centred RSCs, a single dominant state shapes regional security dynamics, such as the United States in North America and South Africa in Southern Africa (Buzan & Wæver, 2003). Great power RSCs focus on global powers like Russia (post-Soviet space). Much of Sub-Saharan Africa has an unstructured RSC because to weak states, limited institutionalisation, or nonstate actors. Davies and Matheri (2025) argue that East Africa is a pre-complex due to strengthening security links within the East African Community and competition between Kenya, Uganda, and Rwanda.

According to Buzan and Wæver (2003), "like most traditional IRT, postcolonial Sub-Saharan Africa remains a challenge for Regional Security Complex Theory" (p. 129). The challenge comes from various African security peculiarities. First, security interdependence frequently arises from internal disputes rather than state-to-state exchanges since domestic insecurity dominates interstate dynamics. According to Buzan and Wæver (2003), "security in Africa is often viewed as 'domestic,' but conflicts often transcend borders and become long-term, transnational crises" (p. 224). Second, official institutions are weak, therefore nonstate actors—rebel groups, terrorist organisations, militias, criminal networks—play outsized roles in security dynamics. Traditional IRT struggles to reflect this reality. Third, colonial boundaries create disjunctures between state jurisdictions and the geographical scope of security dynamics; ethnic groups, economic networks, and conflict formations often span multiple states, creating security interdependence below and across state levels. RSCT's regional focus and postcolonial statehood suitability make it a useful analytical tool

for analysing African security (Minka & Opeyeoluwa, 2023).

Applying RSCT's four-level paradigm to Sub-Saharan Africa shows a complex and changing security picture. The home level dominates security in most of Africa. Modern household instability has several patterns. Starting with the 2020 coup in Mali, military insurgencies in the West African Sahel brought juntas to power in Guinea, Burkina Faso, and Niger, shifting military alliances from Western partners to Russia and escalating violence against civilians (Guichaoua, 2023). The rise of military control has expedited the "securitisation of peace"—a process in which military actions prioritise security above governance, boosting extremist organisations, according to Edet, Edet, and Confidence (2024). Sudan's government-Rapid Support Forces conflict has generated the world's worst displacement crisis, with violence spilling across borders (ACLED, 2025). Several armed organisations in the Democratic Republic of Congo, including the Rwandan-backed M23 rebels, have taken over Goma in January 2025 (International Crisis Group, 2025). Terrorist violence in the Sahel and Horn of Africa has increased dramatically, with JNIM, the Islamic State Sahel Province, and Al-Shabaab expanding their geographic scope and lethality, contributing to Africa's 45 million-plus displaced people. State-backed terrorist groups like Ethiopia-backed Al-Shabaab in Somalia and Rwanda-funded M23 in DR Congo demonstrate the complex relationships between governments and armed groups in African domestic security (Thurston, 2024).

Regional variation is high across Africa's subregions. West Africa has an unstructured regional security complex for various reasons. Threats—terrorism, insurgency, transnational crime, political instability, intercommunal violence—are mostly internal to governments (Minka & Opeyeoluwa, 2023). Although ECOWAS has established legal and normative frameworks to address security challenges, implementation is hindered by insufficient information sharing, intelligence cooperation, and member state commitment (Önal & Oumar, 2021). In January 2024, military juntas in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger left ECOWAS to form the Alliance of

Sahel States, undermining its credibility (Edet et al., 2024). The Sahel shows how numerous mechanisms regionalise domestic disputes. Militants operate freely in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger due to porous borders (Thurston, 2024). Libya's collapse has fuelled Sahel wars with arms and fighters crossing borders. People escaping turmoil in one country destabilise other countries, causing humanitarian catastrophes. Regional intervention forces like the G5 Sahel Joint Force face limited resources, competing national interests, and French assistance departure from Mali (Charbonneau, 2024).

The Horn of Africa is more organised but competitive. Davies and Matheri (2025) call the Horn a "pre-complex" where various factors promote security interdependence. Ethiopia's 2024 Memorandum of Understanding with Somaliland to create a naval station drew heated responses from Somalia and Egypt, with Türkiye mediating the December 2024 Ankara Declaration agreements. The Kenya-Somalia borderlands pose regional security concerns, and Adan and Oluteyo (2025) show how Al-Shabaab uses institutional mistrust and overlapping authorities to sustain operational influence. Regional bodies like IGAD and ATMIS shape security dynamics but struggle with coordination and capability (Adan & Oluteyo, 2025). The US, Türkiye, Qatar, the UAE, China, and Russia battle for strategic footholds, fragmenting regional security alignments (Fisher & Anderson, 2023). Southern Africa resembles a South African-centered RSC, although Pretoria's regional security organization has declined. Despite sending missions to Mozambique's Cabo Delgado area and eastern DR Congo, SADC struggles with funding, political will, and South Africa's internal limits (Buzan & Wæver, 2003; Mkandawire, 2023).

The interregional level shows Africa's subregions' essential relationships. Boko Haram and ISWAP operate throughout Nigeria, Niger, Chad, and Cameroon, integrating West and Central African security dynamics (Thurston, 2024). The Horn of Africa is linked to the Middle East via Red Sea security, Gulf state participation, and the Ethiopia-Eritrea-Somalia nexus, with Gulf countries seeking strategic coastal positions (Davies & Matheri, 2025).

DR Congo, Rwanda, Uganda, and Burundi's Great Lakes wars show how regional security formations resist neat compartmentalisation (International Crisis Group, 2025). Despite the move from Cold War bipolarity to multipolar competition, global engagement still shapes African security dynamics. France, the US, the UK, and EU institutions maintain security relationships across the continent, but their influence has declined, particularly in the Sahel after French withdrawal from Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger (Charbonneau, 2024). Through the Wagner Group and its successor Africa Corps, Russia has provided security aid to military governments in Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and the Central African Republic in exchange for resources and diplomatic support (Edet et al., 2024). China invests in the Belt and Road Initiative and has a small but rising security presence to protect its assets and population (Fisher & Anderson, 2023). Gulf states—UAE, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Türkiye—compete for influence in the Horn of Africa and along the Red Sea coast through economic investment, security cooperation, and diplomatic engagement (Davies & Matheri, 2025).

Modern applications of RSCT to Sub-Saharan Africa show its relevance and areas for improvement. Minka and Opeyeoluwa (2023) use RSCT to study terrorism and regional security in the Sahel, showing how state-level governance failings across borders produce interconnected security issues. They argue that "terrorism festering in the Sahel is a product of bad governance and the inability of the states within the sphere of influence to exert the needed political will and corresponding action" (p. 40), using RSCT to explain why regional rather than national responses are needed. Minko (2025) uses RSCT to analyse political instability and coups in the Sahel, explaining how governance vacuums in one state allow terrorist groups to spread. As regional security dynamics spread instability across borders, "periods of governance vacuum and instability create fertile ground for extremist ideologies to take root" (p. 3). In their 2025 study of the Kenya-Somalia borderlands, Adan and Oluteyo show how "institutional mistrust, overlapping jurisdictions, and persistent socio-economic marginalisation curtail the impact of bilateral counter-terrorism efforts" (p. 1153). The quality of Kenya-Somalia collaboration affects

counter-terrorism effectiveness, according to their research. Edet, Edet, and Confidence (2024) use RSCT to examine Sahel military regimes as "recruitment sergeants for rebel governance" (p. 2), showing how state-level political developments affect regional security dynamics.

Applying RSCT to Sub-Saharan Africa reveals several theoretical refinements. Our theory must include nonstate actors as autonomous security units, not only adjuncts to state-centric research. Terrorist groups, rebel movements, militias, and criminal networks drive security dynamics in many African countries, requiring theoretical frameworks that can account for this (Edet et al., 2024). RSCT should prioritise governance and development for security. Buzan and Wæver's (2003) approach emphasises military and political security, while governance inadequacies, service delivery failures, and socio-economic marginalisation are key to insecurity in Africa (Mkandawire, 2023). Advanced analysis of how external powers shape regional dynamics in multipolar circumstances is needed. RSCT acknowledges global penetration, but the intricacy of current foreign engagement—multiple powers pursuing opposing goals through varied instruments—requires more nuanced theoretical analysis (Fisher & Anderson, 2023). Finally, RSCT should investigate postcolonial critiques of African statehood and regional forms' historical distinctiveness. Ekeh (1975) and Mamdani (1996) show that the colonial inheritance impacts modern African political processes in ways that generic regional security theory may miss.

Despite Sub-Saharan Africa's unique obstacles to Regional Security Complex Theory, it provides a useful analytical framework for analysing security dynamics in the region. RSCT's key insight—that security interdependence produces regional patterns necessitating regional analysis—is still relevant to terrorism, state fragility, political instability, and external intervention. African contexts show that RSCT is still relevant and needs refinement to fully capture the region's unique features: domestic insecurity, nonstate actors, colonial boundaries, and multipolar engagement. Terrorism and state fragility continue to alter African security environments, but

RSCT can capture regional dynamics that national and global studies miss. It helps structure study into regional patterns that shape African security, not provide conclusive answers.

X. METHODOLOGY

Secondary research is used to examine counter-terrorism and state fragility in Sub-Saharan Africa. Desk research, or secondary research, analyses and synthesises existing data, scholarship, and documentary sources rather than collecting primary data through fieldwork, surveys, or interviews (Johnston, 2017). Given the breadth of scholarship on terrorism and security in Africa, the sensitivity of primary data collection in conflict-affected regions, and the need for comprehensive regional analysis across multiple countries and contexts, this methodological approach is ideal for the study's goals.

Secondary research approach depends on the research questions. The study examines complicated, multi-dimensional links between counter-terrorism operations and state instability in distinct African contexts. Secondary research is ideal for synthesising evidence from many nations, time periods, and disciplines (Dolowitz, Buckler, & Sweeney, 2008). According to Johnston (2017), secondary research allows scholars to "address research questions by analysing data that have already been collected for other purposes" (p. 619), integrating findings from numerous studies to gain fresh insights.

XI. CONCLUDING

One of the biggest security issues of the 21st century is counter-terrorism and state fragility in Sub-Saharan Africa. As the continent has become the hub of global terrorism, successful responses are more important than ever. This study found that military-centric methods produce counterintuitive results, external interventions create dependence, and governance inadequacies remain unaddressed.

A fundamental shift toward governance, legitimacy, and African agency is the way forward, not more military force, external intervention, or securitisation.

Sustainable counter-terrorism requires building states that can provide security, justice, and services to all citizens, addressing governance failures that create constituencies receptive to extremist alternatives, rethinking external engagement to support domestic capacity, and centring African perspectives, priorities, and leadership.

This message is practical hope, not despair. The data shows that alternatives exist—kinetic and non-kinetic programs, root cause techniques, and partnerships that promote ability rather than reliance. Scaling these alternatives, overcoming political economy barriers to failure, and establishing political will for fundamental change are the challenges.

Sub-Saharan Africans require security, governance, and states that earn allegiance, not consume them. This view demands acknowledging that counter-terrorism cannot be separated from state-building, security cannot be achieved without governance, and external actors cannot force answers on societies that must shape their own destinies. The scientific community must illuminate these truths, hold authority accountable, and promote the search for more effective, just, and sustainable alternatives. This study hopes to aid that critical effort.

XII. RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Prioritise governance improvements as counter-terrorism strategy: Address corruption, improve services, judicial systems, and state legitimacy. Recognise that military operations fail when people distrust state institutions. Investment in governance foundations helps nations compete with insurgent governance.
2. Strengthen regional security architecture: Fix regional forces' financial, capacity, and political commitment issues. Reduce donor dependence by creating sustainable financial mechanisms. Improve intelligence exchange and operations planning. Trust among member states is key to efficient collaboration.
3. Strengthen community resilience: Promote community-based prevention and early warning. Recognise that communities are the front line of counter-terrorism and must be encouraged as

partners rather than passive receivers of security operations.

4. Deepen integration of postcolonial perspectives: Counter-terrorism studies should better combine postcolonial state theory to examine how colonial inheritance, postcolonial political logics, and international power relations impact terrorism and responses. Challenge Western-centric views that obscure Africa.
5. Conduct rigorous impact evaluations of non-kinetic approaches: Use reliable methods to evaluate deradicalisation, preventive, and reintegration activities. Move beyond descriptive accounts to measure results and find best practices. Prove what works in Africa.

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