

The Accra Initiative and Terrorism in West Africa: A Critical Review

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Abstract

The Accra Initiative was originally adopted by Benin, Togo, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana and Burkina Faso in September 2017 to promote coordination and cooperation towards addressing the security complex, especially the threats of terrorism within their national borders. This largely desk-based qualitative research paper examined concrete steps taken by state parties to fully operationalise the Accra Initiative, challenges it confronts and measures to remedy these challenges as efforts to stem the tide of terrorism from West Africa. The paper found that while significant progress has been made to fully operationalise the Accra Initiative, several factors, including operational and funding challenges continue to dog its effectiveness and sustainability. Thus, the study recommended that for the Accra Initiative to effectively deal with the terrorism menace in the subregion, these challenges should be addressed as a matter of urgency.

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Overview of Terrorism in West Africa

West Africa remains a troubled spot as coups, conflicts, organised crimes, violent extremism and terrorism continue to rage on resulting in a cocktail of implications for human security (WANEP, 2019a; WANEP, 2019b). The security situation in the subregion continues to deteriorate; for example, in the first quarters of 2020 and 2023 respectively, 265 terrorist attacks and 3,261 deaths (WANEP, 2020a) and 291 terrorist attacks, 1,869 deaths and 333 injuries (WANEP, 2023) were recorded across the subregion. Credible evidence also points to the geographic expansion of terrorist groups into the littoral states in West Africa (WANEP, 2022a), despite efforts to address same (WANEP, 2023). The security complex especially in the Sahel is spreading southward to Benin, Cote d'Ivoire, Ghana, and Togo: the terrorist attacks in Cote d'Ivoire and Togo as well as recruitment cells discovered in Ghana give credence to this fact (WANEP, 2019b; KAS, 2022).

Several factors, including community and ethnic violence, dwindling and or a lack of livelihood opportunities, and illicit trafficking of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) account for this volatile security situation in the subregion (GTI, 2023; Aidoo, 2018). For example, emerging trends from attacks in the Sahel region suggest the exploitation of ethnic tensions by terrorist groups to perpetuate violence in many local communities. Also, the growing influx of refugees across the subregion often creates division, tension and conflicts between host communities and refugees over competition for limited farmlands, water and food (WANEP, 2019b). Lastly, the available data indicate that out of the over 640 million SALW circulating globally, 100 million are found in Africa, 30 million in Sub-Saharan Africa, and eight million in West Africa alone. The related rise of a gun-culture and rising spate of terrorist attacks undermine regional security.

The humanitarian situation in the subregion continues to worsen as internally displaced persons (IDPs), refugees and migrant flows keep rising. For example, as of 2022, Burkina Faso alone had over 765,000 people displaced and 25,000 refugees in neighbouring countries. Niger also hosts over 246,000 refugees and some 186,000 of its own population displaced especially in the Diffa, Tillabéri and Maradi regions as a result of terrorism (WANEP, 2020a; WANEP, 2020b).

Besides, the situation has affected some critical infrastructures such as health and education in the affected communities. For example, over 60 health centres have been closed, and services in another 65 impaired in Burkina Faso alone, denying some 626,000 people access to basic healthcare. This exposes especially women and children to health-related risks (WANEP, 2020a; WANEP, 2020b). Besides, the situation has led to closure of about 2,024 schools in Burkina Faso depriving over 330,000 children's education. Also, over 800 schools in Mali

have been destroyed and over 250,000 affected. The situation has further exposed more girls to child marriage, and many children to child labour (over 700,000 adolescent and young children are presently found to be involved in illegal small-scale mining in the Central Sahel) making several children vulnerable to terrorist recruitment (WANEP, 2020a; WANEP, 2020b; WANEP, 2022b).

Indeed, activities of terrorist groups have been rampant in Africa. Since the declaration of war on terrorism by the United States (US) after the 9/11 attacks, several steps have been taken by countries, regions, and the international community to address the menace. Particularly, the African continent witnessing the gush in activities of terrorist groups like Boko Haram and Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), countries have come together to initiate counter insurgency measures to protect themselves from the threats they pose. For example, the Liptako-Gourma group, a non-state armed group operating across Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, has engaged in several activities that have resulted in complex security, political, socio-economic, and environmental challenges. This has prompted an array of initiatives in response to the rising terror in West Africa, including the African Union International Support Mission in Mali (AFISMA), the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF), the Group of Five for the Sahel (G-5 Sahel), the Accra Initiative (AI), the Fusion and Liaison Unit (UFL), and the Sahel Alliance. The MNJTF was created by the Lake Chad Basin countries (Cameroun, Niger, Nigeria and Chad) in 2015 to contain the spread of Boko Haram; whereas the G-5 Sahel was formed in 2014 by Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Chad and Mauritania to counter the rising acts of terrorism particularly those associated with the rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and al-Qaeda affiliates in the Sahel region (Birikorang & Abdallah, 2023). These interventions have had the shared objective of ensuring durable peace and security in the subregion.

Mirroring these initiatives, and following the 2016 terror attacks on Burkina Faso, coupled with the potential to spill over to the littoral states in West Africa, the Accra Initiative was established in September 2017 in Accra, Ghana. Similar to the MNJTF and the G-5 Sahel, the Accra Initiative signifies a subregional cooperative security mechanism aimed at thwarting the spread of violent extremism and terrorism from the Sahel and addressing transnational organised crimes in border areas of the participating countries (Birikorang & Abdallah, 2023). According to Sampaio et al. (2023), the Accra Initiative appears to be one of the most relevant counterterrorism approaches on the African continent. However, over six years after its adoption, aside of the mostly ad hoc military operations and periodic meetings held by security officials of the state parties, little is heard about concrete efforts made to ensure the fully effective and sustainable activation of the Initiative. Indeed, the trans-nationalized nature of the security complex and terrorism situation in West Africa calls for a more

robust and integrated responses including joint border surveillance, intelligence gathering and sharing, and other well-harmonised operational systems to address the terrorism menace (WANEP, 2019b), something the Accra Initiative promises to offer.

A major setback to efforts by countries in the subregion has often been the non-enforcement of innovative initiatives they adopt to address collective problems in West Africa. It is not uncommon for the countries in the West African subregion to make sound political declarations and in the end fail to commit the necessary critical resources for their sound and sustained execution (Aidoo, 2018). Therefore, the overarching purpose of this desk-based research was to examine the practical steps taken by the state parties to the Accra Initiative towards bridging the gaps between commitments made on paper and practical or actionable measures taken to fully execute the provisions of the Initiative in order to overcome terrorism in the subregion.

The following critical questions engaged the attention of the author: How does the Accra Initiative propose to deal with terrorism in West Africa? What practical measures have been put in place to give full effect to the provisions therein the Accra Initiative? What are the key factors affecting the full, effective and sustainable operationalisation of the Accra Initiative?

A Short Note on the Methodology

The qualitative method and interpretivist paradigm were deemed appropriate for this study because they allow for the analysis of the different interactions among the variables, and flexibility to probe for clarifications. Data for this paper was drawn mainly from secondary materials retrieved from journal articles, published and unpublished books and official reports from governments, civil society groups, and internet sources. These secondary data covered both theoretical and empirical literature on terrorism and violent extremism. The overall information that was obtained were carefully extracted and the critical issues were organized around salient themes based on the structure of the questions and then analysed.

An Overview of The Accra Initiatives

The Accra Initiative was adopted on September 14 2017, by four coastal states (Benin, Cote d'Ivoire, Ghana and Togo) and one inland country (Burkina Faso) in West Africa (Mali and Niger joined in 2018 as observers but were subsequently admitted as full members in 2019), who were struggling to counter terrorism domestically. The Initiative aimed at averting the lack of security in the subregion,

and to create a single entity that would coordinate cooperation between the South-West African countries to overcome the regional security complex (Amedzerator, 2022). It also aimed at protecting the countries from a spillover of terrorism from the Sahel and to address transnational organised crimes in border areas (Kwarkye, Abatan, & Matongbada, 2019).

The Accra Initiative is based on three major pillars – information exchange, the training of security and intelligence personnel, and the conduct of joint cross-border military operations. These pillars, when fully operationalised, will undoubtedly help to reduce the organised criminal activities in border areas, and ensure the cooperation of member countries in destroying terrorist networks, including preventing their spread, impeding their ability to seek political asylum, and directly combatting terrorists (Amedzerator, 2022).

The Accra Initiative operates on a simple structure, with coordination housed in the Ghanaian National Security Secretariat and a focal point in the ministry responsible for each member country (Noussi & Tametong, 2022). Since its establishment, member countries have held some conferences and undertaken joint operations. These are discussed under the next section.

Progress Made Towards Enforcement of the Accra Initiative

After its establishment in 2017, the Accra Initiative has held and sustained frequent meetings between member states every two months for expert meetings and every five months for ministerial meetings (Noussi & Tametong, 2022). In February 2019, the president of Ghana, Nana Addo Dankwa Akufo-Addo initiated a meeting with the other heads of states of member countries to begin a process of institutionalisation of the Initiative. This led to the approval of the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on security and intelligence cooperation among member countries of the Accra Initiative in 2020 in Bamako (Noussi & Tametong, 2022).

Also, under the Accra Initiative, four military operations, dubbed Operation Koudalgou I-IV have been successfully carried out between 2018 and 2021, which have resulted in the destruction of some terrorist camps and arrest of suspected terrorists (Noussi & Tametong, 2022). It focuses on one of the pillars of the Initiative, thus, cross-border security.

The first operation, Koudalgou I occurred in May 2018. This was a joint operation by Benin, Burkina Faso, Ghana, and Togo, and it led to the arrest of 52 individuals in Burkina Faso, 42 in Benin, 95 in Togo and 13 in Ghana (Birikorang & Abdallah, 2023). The operation allowed for member countries to pull their resources and efforts together – a pooling of efforts to deal with the security threat. However, there were some issues concerning the liaison efforts between

the forces of the participating countries (KAS, 2022). Nonetheless, the Operation Koudalgou I was totally viewed as a successful step by all the representatives of the member states. Three major recommendations emerged at the end of the operation. First was to have a clearly defined legal framework for future operations; second was to plan for two of such operations every year; and the third was to improve on the communication means (KAS, 2022).

Koudalgou II was conducted in November 2018 with Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana leading the operation. According to reports, the operation dismantled the logistical support of terrorist groups present in the subregion. It led to the diffusing of 16 elements of Islamic State for the Greater Sahara (ISGS) and arrested 8 others. The operation is also known to have affected Abu Hamza, whose real name is Mahamane Oumar Youssoufou's group linked to the ISGS. These groups have been recruiting individuals to be trained in the handling of weapons and explosives in the Gourma region of Mali (KAS, 2022). The operation did enough to cripple the organisations of these extremist groups lingering in the Northern part of Ghana and other nearby countries.

The third and fourth operations, Koudalgou III and IV (Zone 2), was held in 2019, and 2021 respectively in Benin, Togo, Burkina Faso, Cote d' Ivoire, Mali, Niger, Ghana. This involved deployment of over 6,000 troops and led to the confiscations of some logistics used by these dangerous groups "including weapons, narcotic drugs, mining implements, contraband goods" and some vehicles "in addition to the arrest of 386 people, including 107 foreigners in the five northern regions of Ghana" (Birikorang & Abdallah, 2023, p. 2). According to Noussi and Tametong (2022), the operations carried out by the Accra Initiative resulted in the arrest of about 700 suspected extremists and terrorists, and the seizure of several homemade weapons.

Besides, in May 2020, the joint Operation Comoé launched by Côte d'Ivoire and Burkina Faso, went into force. This resulted in the arrest of 38 suspected terrorists (24 in Burkina Faso and 14 in Côte d'Ivoire). The action contributed to destroying one terrorist base in Alidugu, and confiscated arms, ammunition, memory chips, and mobile phones (Amedzerator, 2022).

To fulfil the second pillar of the Accra Initiative, information and intelligence sharing, there have been regular meeting of heads of security of member states. These meetings provide a platform for discussions on what to do better to improve the Initiatives counterterrorism operations (UNOWAS, 2022). For instance, in November 2022, the International Conference on the Accra Initiative was held in Accra, Ghana, to address the enduring danger of extremist violence in states in the Sahel and the threat their actions pose to neighbouring West African coastal nations (ADF, 2022). This meeting, according to the United Nation Office for West

Africa and the Sahel (UNOWAS), discussed how to build coordinated resilience against the terrorists, security concerns facing the region, the importance of partnerships with border communities, how to combat terrorism financing, and opportunities and achievements made so far (UNOWAS, 2022).

According to the African Defense Forum (ADF), the Accra Initiative agreed during the November 21-22, 2022 Conference to assemble a multinational military force to help halt the spread of the violent extremism spilling out of the Sahel toward West African coastal nations (ADF, 2022). It is out of this that they approved the deployment of about 2,000 Soldiers to Burkina Faso within one month as part of the Multinational Joint Task Force/Accra Initiative (MNJTF/AI) collaborative operation (ADF, 2022). The report also observed that the taskforce comprised 10,000 Soldiers, most of whom were to be stationed in Tamale, Ghana, with an intelligence component in the Burkinabe capital, Ouagadougou. Through these conferences, the Initiative have seen support from the United Nations, Britain, and Germany (ADF, 2022; Birikorang & Abdallah, 2023).

On the third pillar that addresses the issue of training security and intelligence personnel, the Initiative in 2020 embarked on a security and intelligence training in Côte d'Ivoire. This was to debrief the Forces of the member states on the changing approaches of the extremists and terrorists, and how to handle their operations to be able to curb their actions. The foregoing discussions indicate the progress the Accra Initiative has made since its establishment in 2017. That notwithstanding, the Initiative is faced with several major challenges. These are highlighted and discussed further in the section subsequent to this one.

Challenges the Accra Initiative's Operationalisation Faces

One key challenge that the operationalization of the Accra Initiative faces is its ad hoc nature. Kwarkye, Abatan and Matongbada (2019) notes that despite the Initiative leading to some arrests, these operations have been ad hoc in nature. Duration for the operations have usually been limited both in terms of duration and geographically. Typically, the operations were often restricted to some few regions of the state parties (Kwarkye, Abatan, & Matongbada, 2019; Aubyn, 2021), and limited in duration – usually a four or five-day deployment. According to Noussi and Tametong (2022) these ad hoc approaches have little effect on the plans and activities of these terrorist groups: they only momentarily pause their activities and do not ensure their total shutdown (Kwarkye, Abatan, & Matongbada, 2019).

This therefore means that between periods of operations by the Initiative, activities of these violent groups may occur. According to Albert Kan-Dapaah, the Ghanaian Minister for National Security cited in Africanews (2022), in between

the first three months of 2022, Africa recorded 346 attacks, almost half of which were in the west of the continent. For this reason, Birikorang and Abdallah (2023) argue that since these violent groups continue to move and operate freely along the borders of member states, the claim of defusing terrorist cells by operations of the Accra Initiative is difficult to verify. The authors also argued that such military swoops are often “exploratory and a fishing expedition” with the hopes of arresting criminals (p. 2). They continued to affirm that these raids have led to the arrest of several innocent civilians who later have been released. But more importantly, there are also lack of evidence of any prosecution of the suspected terrorists arrested by operations carried out under the Initiative (Birikorang & Abdallah, 2023).

Again, a joint cross-border military operations and intelligence gathering needs substantial resources and a continuous flow of same to bring about convincing and lasting results (Noussi & Tametong, 2022). The ability to mobilise resources internally, mainly funding is one of the challenges facing the Initiative. It appears the Initiative has limited intelligence capabilities due to lack of resources or funding which means they are unable to effectively track and control the movements of these terrorists (Kwarkye, Abatan, & Matongbada, 2019). Even though Kwarkye, Abatan and Matongbada (2019) acknowledged resource constraints within the Initiative, a report by Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS, 2022) argued that the Initiative is mainly funded by member countries, and not dependent on foreign funding. This according to the report, allows the member states to set their own agenda and priorities, an argument that is supported by Kwarkye, Abatan and Matongbada (2019). Birikorang and Abdallah (2023) however, questioned the sustainability of such an initiative in terms of funding by strictly the member states seeing that almost all the countries suffer from one economic challenge or the other.

Nonetheless, reports indicate that the Accra Initiative receives funding from the EU, Germany, Great Britain, etc. (ADF, 2022). For instance, more than \$142 million has been committed by the EU for border controls, intelligence capacity enhancements, conflict prevention and infrastructure protection to ensure a lasting peace in the northern parts of coastal states of Ghana, Benin, Côte d’Ivoire, and Togo (ADF, 2022). Birikorang and Abdallah (2023) also note that the filed operations hub set up in Northern Ghana by the Initiative was possible due to funding from Germany. The involvement of these external powers may not only hamper the intelligence gathering of the Initiative but also risks having the external powers setting priorities and using this as an opportunity to engage in their proxy wars (Birikorang & Abdallah, 2023).

One challenge that is gradually emerging and proves to be vital to the

Accra Initiative is in relation to the political unrest facing some of its member countries, Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso. Since 2020, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger have all had their fair share of coups. These developments have raised questions as to the way forward for the Initiative. An example is drawn from Mali's exit from the G-5 Sahel which has left the Group in a fix (Birikorang & Abdallah, 2023). Mali played a substantial role in the G-5 Sahel and their unexplained exit has affected the Group massively. Indeed, Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger all under military dictatorships have had a dodgy relationship with ECOWAS and AU. These countries have subsequently been suspended by the ECOWAS and the AU. The main concern with the Accra Initiative borders on whether the other civilian regimes (ECOWAS members) will continue to work with the junta regimes, or whether these military regimes will agree to continue to partner these other ECOWAS members.

Some other challenges that have been identified include language barrier, differences in operational concepts of member states, and the lack of attention to the socio-economic challenges of the member countries (Aubyn, 2021; Birikorang & Abdallah, 2023; Kwarkye, Abatan, & Matongbada, 2019). Aubyn (2022) and Kwarkye, Abatan and Matongbada (2019) all mention language barrier as one of the challenges facing the Initiative and its dealings. According to these authors, language barriers between Ghana, an English-speaking country and the rest of the countries who are all Francophones have sometimes hindered effective communication. Kwarkye, Abatan and Matongbada (2019) also adds stresses on the differences in the operational concepts of these member states as one of the challenges. They highlight that while Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire and Togo all have gendarmeries (somewhat like the military police), Ghana do not. Benin on the other hand has the Republican Police, which is a merger of their police and gendarmerie. This, to Kwarkye, Abatan and Matongbada (2019) hinders the smooth operations of the Initiative with the mobilising of forces from member states.

For Aubyn (2022), and Birikorang and Abdallah (2023), the lack of attention to the socio-economic challenges facing member countries is worrisome and could hamper all steps being put in place to eradicate the dangers of these violent groups. The writers contend that the Initiative has mainly been a security attempt to deal with the menace, while leaving out the root cause of these terrorist groups, which is socio-economic in nature. Poverty, high rate of unemployment in these countries make the youth a target for recruiting by the violent groups. The claim therefore is that without a clear framework to dealing with these socio-economic challenges, the Initiative will only be chasing the issue and will not be able to eradicate it.

Conclusion: Making the Accra Initiative Work Better

This desk-based research paper examined steps taken to fully operationalise the Accra Initiative, challenges it faces and suggests measures to address same in order to help strengthen efforts to stem the tide of terrorism from the West African subregion. As discussed afore, while significant progress has been made towards the full operationalisation of the Initiative, several factors, including operational and funding challenges continue to dog its effectiveness and sustainability. Thus, the author recommended that for the Accra Initiative to be efficient and effective in dealing with the terrorism phenomenon in the subregion, the highlighted challenges need to be addressed.

As Birikorang and Abdallah (2023) posit, the Accra Initiative will have to focus on preventive measures by recognising the challenges the youth and other vulnerable groups face with the socio-economic challenges member countries are facing. The authors note that women and the youth who are unemployed, out of school, and those facing economic hardships are recruited to serve these terrorist groups, and also contribute as breadwinners for the group. By raiding their camps and making arrests, the root causes are not addressed and risks having these groups recruiting more of the vulnerable groups and acting in a cautious manner to cause more havoc. It is therefore imperative that, in their efforts to deal with the rising threats of terrorism, leaders of the state parties to the Accra Initiative develop a framework that will contribute more to improving the socio-economic standards within their respective countries. This will help in the preventive approach to addressing the menace.

It is also important that the ad hoc nature of the operations of the Accra Initiative be addressed. The four-or five-days operation that is usually carried out by the Initiative is woefully inadequate to completely dismantle the systems and cells created by the extremists and terrorist groups. It should be noted that operations of these violent groups mainly rest on the head of such groups and their righthand men. It is therefore important to cut off the head of the snake to be able to completely render it inactive. However, these leaders receive the best of security protection and are very difficult to track. To be able to arrest these leaders, a lot of intelligence gathering, and undercover missions need to be embarked on. This takes time, months or years. The continuous intelligence gathering will help expose the main source of their operations which when destroyed will completely cripple the wings of these violent groups. They may emerge again, but it will take a lot of time, energy and resource to do so which offers the Accra Initiative a lot of time to also prepare for such emergence.

More, to address the ad hoc nature of its operations, the Accra Initiative does not only need time, but adequate resources also, particularly funding. To be

able to gather intelligence for months or years, and to be able to have successful undercover missions, resources and funding are vital. With the economic challenges the member states are currently facing, internal funding alone will not be enough to make the Initiative function effectively. However, knowing the challenges that are associated with external funding especially from outside the continent in terms of controls over decision-making, there should be a framework under the Accra Initiative that stipulates the limits of supporting partners in terms of control and decision-making. They should be able to strike an agreement to keep external supporters distant from the decision-making of the Initiative. Terrorism is a global phenomenon which does not affect only one region. Terrorists' activities here will ultimately affect global peace and stability hence it will be in everyone's interest to support in whatever way possible to curtail this challenge without any strings attached. By having such a framework, it will strengthen member states to take ownership of their decisions, dictate its pace, direction and operation (Birikorang & Abdallah, 2023).

Lastly, it is necessary to involve other stakeholders or actors like the civil societies in the Initiative's activities. Civil society actors are important partners when it comes to addressing challenges a society faces (Birikorang & Abdallah, 2023). At the moment, civil society groups have been left out of the Accra Initiative's plans, and there has not been any clear strategy on how they can be brought on board. These groups better understand the nuances and complexities of their environment. They have people around that can easily provide intelligence to the Initiative. It is consequently necessary to involve those that are on the ground and understand the ecosystem they are operating in. This will also help improve communication between the Accra Initiative and some ethnic groups like the Fulanis who think they are being targeted by the Initiative's operations since most of those arrested have some Fulani roots (KAS, 2022).

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