



RESEARCH ARTICLE

ECOWAS AND REGIONAL SECURITY GOVERNANCE: ADDRESSING TERRORISM, CROSS BORDER CRIMES AND INSECURITY IN WEST AFRICA

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ABSTRACT

This study analyzes ECOWAS and Regional Security Governance: Addressing Terrorism, Cross Border Crimes and Insecurity in West Africa. Using case studies of interventions in Mali, Nigeria, and the Lake Chad Basin, the research assesses the efficacy of ECOWAS's collaborative security architecture in combating organized crime networks, human trafficking, and violent extremism. It also looks at the difficulties of implementing regional security policies in the face of diverse national interests, resource constraints, and changing security threats. The study, which draws on security governance theory and empirical data, highlights the shortcomings and achievements of ECOWAS's strategy while emphasizing how crucial it is to improve coordination with foreign partners, build institutional capacity, and address the underlying causes of insecurity. The results provide policy recommendations for strengthening ECOWAS's role in promoting sustainable peace and stability in West Africa and add to the continuing intellectual discussions on regional responses to transnational security concerns. To increase its performance, ECOWAS should obtain sustainable funds, dialogue better with the AES, integrate civil society more and collaborate better with trans-regional institutions such as the MNJTF. The response to the complex security threats that are faced by the region should change the current reactive stance taken by the organization and adopt proactive approaches that are supported by appropriate resources and are politically united.

Keywords: Regional security, governance, terrorism, crimes, insecurity

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1.0. INTRODUCTION

The current security situation in West Africa is defined by increasing fragility brought on by the combination of transnational organized crime, violent extremism, and ongoing political instability. These terrorist groups associated with Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State have extended their operational reach from the Sahel into coastal states throughout the past ten years by taking advantage of the porous borders, localized grievances, ungoverned spaces and governance failures (Ogbue et al., 2025; Ogbonnaya, 2025) . Development achievements have been destroyed by the resultant patterns of insurgent violence, inter-communal strife, and forced displacement, which have put additional strain on already precarious state institutions (UNOWAS, 2023). This trend has coincided with a rise in cross-border criminal economies, such as the trafficking of people, drugs, small arms, and light weapons, which seems to have weakened public trust in national security systems and reinforced cycles of insecurity (UNODC, 2022). These interconnected concerns highlight the fact that security issues in West Africa are essentially regional in character rather than limited to national borders.

In this regard, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has become a key player in the control of regional security. In order to coordinate member state responses to organized crime, terrorism, and violence, ECOWAS uses operational and normative tools like the ECOWAS violence Prevention Framework (ECPF), early warning systems, and collective security protocols. Nevertheless, the region experiences of increasing attacks, insurgency spillovers, and illegal cross-border crimes in spite of these frameworks (Aja, 2023). Critical analytical questions concerning the efficacy, coherence, and enforcement capability of ECOWAS's security architecture are brought up by this seeming contradiction. Potential discrepancies between institutional commitments and implementation realities are indicated by persistent insecurity. These discrepancies may include member state political will disparities, resource limitations, coordination difficulties, and the intricate relationship between national sovereignty and regional intervention mandates (Aning & Okeke, 2021; UNOWAS, 2023).

Thus, the main issue of this study is to explain why insecurity continues in spite of ECOWAS's changing security systems and what this indicates about the potency of regional security governance in West Africa. In particular, it examines the effectiveness of ECOWAS's operational tools, institutional structure, and cooperative agreements in addressing terrorism, transnational crimes, and more general insecurity issues within the region. By looking at these problems, the study adds to the continuing discussions over regional organizations' ability to handle non-traditional security challenges in settings characterized by transnational dangers and fragile statehood.

2.0. CONCEPTUAL DISCOURSE AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. Conceptual Discourse

In the context of ECOWAS, regional security governance refers to the formalized structures, procedures, and group mechanisms that member nations use to coordinate their responses to common security concerns. The pursuit of regional security by ECOWAS is a response to the growing governance issues that West African nations are facing (Lenshie, Okafor, & Chinaza, 2025). ECOWAS has created legally binding protocols on peacekeeping, anti-corruption, small arms control,



and fighting drug trafficking and organized crime because it recognizes that peace, stability, and security are necessary for socioeconomic development and regional integration (Agbo et al., 2018; Akanji, 2019; Lindberg et al., 2022). Terrorism refers to acts of violence committed by extremist groups that operate outside of West African boundaries with the intention of undermining regional stability and national authority. However, the rise of autocratic administration in this sub-region presents challenges to these cooperative efforts. Borderlands are susceptible to war, transnational criminality, and non-state armed actors are taking advantage of the political instability, poor state institutions, and permeable borders (Bach, 2012; Ogbonna et al., 2023). Generally, persistent threats to state sovereignty, human security, and the goals of regional integration are reflected in insecurity

2.2. Theoretical Framework

Security governance theory is the form to adapt an exit breaking away the state as the provider of security to multi-level and networked forms transcending state boundaries and integrating states, regional and global organizations in the governance of insecurity (Krahmann, 2003). It is therefore not out of place to state that in West Africa ECOWAS exemplifies this model since it has positioned itself as a central figure in terrorism, cross-border crimes and human trafficking as the theory demands regionalized and collective security solutions (Francis, 2019). The adoption of ECOWAS Conflict Prevention Framework (ECPF) in 2008 and 2020-2024 Priority Action Plan to eradicate terrorism demonstrates the forms of effort that the organization has put on the institutionalization of norms and operational frameworks towards the governance of regional security (Aning & Pokoo, 2014). Security governance theory identifies these deficiencies as a sign that sustainable regional security needs more than just an institutionalized framework, but the availability of trusted resources (Boas, 2017).

In the Lake Chad Basin, where ECOWAS is a part of the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF), one can see how regional collaboration is a way of battling violent extremism by having shared operations against Boko Haram and ISWAP. The MNJTF is a confluence of military, political, and humanitarian elements, which is the multi-actor, multi-level characteristic of security governance (Onapajo & Uzodike, 2018). Nevertheless, the recent decision by Niger to pull out of the MNJTF and ECOWAS highlights the frailty of this form of governance as problems of security can only be mitigated when member states are willing to put collective interests over any idea of sovereignty (International Crisis Group, 2023). Nigeria also demonstrates that ECOWAS is formulating initiatives to eliminate human trafficking, such as the Organized Crime: West African Response to Trafficking (OCWAR-T) project that has the aim of enhancing member state capacity to deal with the issue of human trafficking and other forms of organized crime. Aimed at collaborating with international stakeholders, such as EU, GIZ, UNDP, and UNODC, OCWAR-T builds on the prevalent notion of security governance theory, i.e. multi-level partnerships (Iwuoha, 2020).

However, this has been hampered by chronic funding gaps and unequal political will which is evidence of the theory that addresses resource asymmetries and institutional frailties (Aniche, Iwuoha, & Isike, 2022). Overall, the application of security governance theory reveals that although ECOWAS has created noteworthy frameworks and initiatives to fight human trafficking, terrorism, and cross-border crimes, structural issues like a lack of funding, divided political will, and recent withdrawals of important Sahelian states continue to limit the organization's effectiveness. ECOWAS needs to align



its cooperative mechanisms with larger African Union and UN structures, guarantee sustainable financing, and enhance institutional legitimacy in order to fortify its role as a security governor.

3.0. MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study broadly analyzes ECOWAS and Regional Security Governance: Addressing Terrorism, Cross Border Crimes and Insecurity in West Africa. Using case studies of interventions in Mali, Nigeria, and the Lake Chad Basin, the research assesses the efficacy of ECOWAS's collaborative security architecture in combating organized crime networks, human trafficking, and violent extremism. It also looks at the difficulties of implementing regional security policies in the face of diverse national interests, resource constraints, and changing security threats.

The study used the documentary method of data collection, which entailed locating and examining previously published written materials, including scholarly publications, official reports, policy documents, and reliable internet sources that were pertinent to the research topic. By using this method, the researchers were able to obtain a large amount of secondary data that offered both historical and modern viewpoints on the topic.

The study also used content analysis, a qualitative research method that methodically looks at the themes, patterns, and meanings embedded in textual data, to interpret and make sense of the information gathered. This combined approach allowed the researchers to critically assess what was already known, spot reoccurring problems, and make well-informed conclusions without going on fieldwork, guaranteeing that the analysis was thorough and grounded in context.

4.0. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. ECOWAS and Challenges of Addressing Regional Threats in West Africa

In as much as ECOWAS has undergone numerous protocols and a Revised Treaty of 1993 to emerge as a functional security mechanism building on economic integration instrument, it has however been experiencing a major challenge in implementation of its regional security policies (Okon and Ojatorotu, 2022). Transnational organized crime and violent extremism have increased insecurity in West Africa, especially in the Sahel, over the past two decades, and ECOWAS, AU, and international organizations have not done enough to resolve the problem (Herpolsheimer, 2024). Such layered issues are posing existential threats with their consequent implications on the ECOWAS regional security systems and frameworks (Megwalu and Garba, 2024).

Regional security policies as instituted by ECOWAS are likely to go a long way in achieving regional security because different national interests and adherence to regional power politics have held it back. In the instance of the Boko Haram threat, ECOWAS has never been in a position to play a major role mainly because of the prevailing dominant role of Nigeria in the region and the implications that the action would have of Nigeria being involved. Regional powers and national pride make it hard to give small neighbors to mobilize around the threats to the big countries, in case these threats should be addressed by the whole region (ISS, 2019).

Such a relationship is also evinced by the attitude of Algeria towards the Mali crisis in 2020. The president of Algeria stated that the country will not interfere in its activities in the Sahel, promising



not to become involved in the efforts of ECOWAS to solve the crisis in Mali, saying that 'the resolution of the Malian crisis is 90 per cent Algerian in nature' (O'Driscoll et al. 2021). This ideology was due to Algeria being disappointed in ECOWAS over failing to include the country (Algeria) in the resolving of the Malian coup in August 2020 and this aspect illustrates how external regional powers may confuse ECOWAS in conflict resolution (Nyandong, 2023). The issue of internal fragmentation among the ECOWAS member states was also a major setback especially since there has always been tension between the Anglophones and Francophones. Policy deadlocks have frequently been caused by differences in political ideology, economic orientation, and foreign policy alignment, particularly with former colonial powers. Strong political and economic ties between Francophone West African nations and France persist, sometimes at odds with the regional goals of ECOWAS. These internal conflicts have delayed the adoption of important integration policies and impeded the creation of a cohesive regional identity (Anderson, 2025).

ECOWAS is hampered by its own internal disputes over responding to conflict situations and disunity even in agreeing to interpret common norms leading to reoccurrence of use of force exemplified by disagreements over Presidential term limit norms, which have corroded political will and unity, leading to the frequent crises and even coups. The changes put forward can set back the previous achievements of democracy (Herpolsheimer, 2024). The governance process in the organization has mainly been reactive since the organization deriving policy tools to solve them, as they arise, rather than preventing the crisis (Aggad & Miyandazi, 2017). One of the problems that have been prevalent in the functionality of ECOWAS is that of financial mismanagement and responsibility. Corruption and failure to be transparent in the allocation and expenditure related matters have weakened confidence in the ability of the organization to meet its mandate. The financial mismanagement, inappropriate distribution of resources, and poor institutional control have derailed many of the ambitious programs which ECOWAS aimed at achieving. Unless these humiliations deal with checks and balances, the regional initiatives are mainly ceremonial, with no much effect on the lives of the citizens on the ground (Anderson, 2025).

The agency is still trying to overcome its governance and institutional inefficiencies that impede its efficacy with slow decision making, bureaucratic inefficiencies and the lack of political will among member states being some major bane (Anderson, 2025). Its failure to timely act to confront the Malian conflict in 2012 as well as contain terrorist menace in Northern Mali and North-Eastern Nigeria are indicators of its military technologies and other resources deficiency in the light of the changing security needs in the region (Okon, 2020; Desmidt & Hauck, 2017). And although the benefits that collectivism bring to safeguarding regional interests need not be overlooked, the functioning of an ECOWAS regional security architecture, along with the discharge of a certain mandate, is marred by such primary daunting issues as multi-dimensionality of the structure, coordination and cooperation across the member states, as well as capacity concerns in terms of personnel, planning, Standard Operation Procedures (SOPs), logistics and equipment, and funding (Akran and Udeagbala, 2022).

Inability to monitor the borders and porous boundary lines and ungoverned spaces is the inability of the member countries. The classic scenario is the extensively stretched Sambisa Forest that terror groups have used to develop training grounds of their members and as a means of transporting and delivering weapons within the sub-region in Nigeria (Akran and Udeagbala, 2022). The dynamic

nature of security threats poses a big challenge in terms of implementation of ECOWAS. A case in point, the Boko Haram crisis has extended to the rest of the Lake Chad Basin and, therefore, it has a presence of an effect in West and Central Africa, which is why it is challenging to anchor a regional framework on any of the ECOWAS or Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS) (ISS, 2019). Such trans-regional perspective makes the jurisdictional clarity and the coordinated response more complicated. Terrorism and insurgency result which is a constituent of new nature of warfare in West Africa has proven to be very devastating with a lot of brutality especially in Nigeria and Mali. Globalization and the development of technologies only intensify these crises to an even greater degree (Akran and Udeagbala, 2022).

The only notable security risk to the Lake Chad Basin area in 2020 was the jihadist insurgency Boko Haram; according to the Global Terrorism Index 2019, it was one of the four most lethal terrorist groups in the globe (IEP 2020; Nyandong, 2023). Since the recent coups in West Africa, ECOWAS has so far failed to resolve the constitutional status, as traditional pro-coups strategies (such as mediation and sanctions) were inefficient against alliances of coup leaders and external powers with local division. The fact that military coups in Mali (in August 2020 and May of 2021) or in Burkina Faso (in January and September of 2022) or in Niger (in July of 2023) have become a wave evidences the fact that the organization fails to prevent the acts of unconstitutional changes of government, let alone respond to them (Herpolsheimer, 2024). However, the list of ECOWAS 15 member countries, including the suspended Mali, Guinea, Burkina Faso and Niger are indicated in Figure 1.

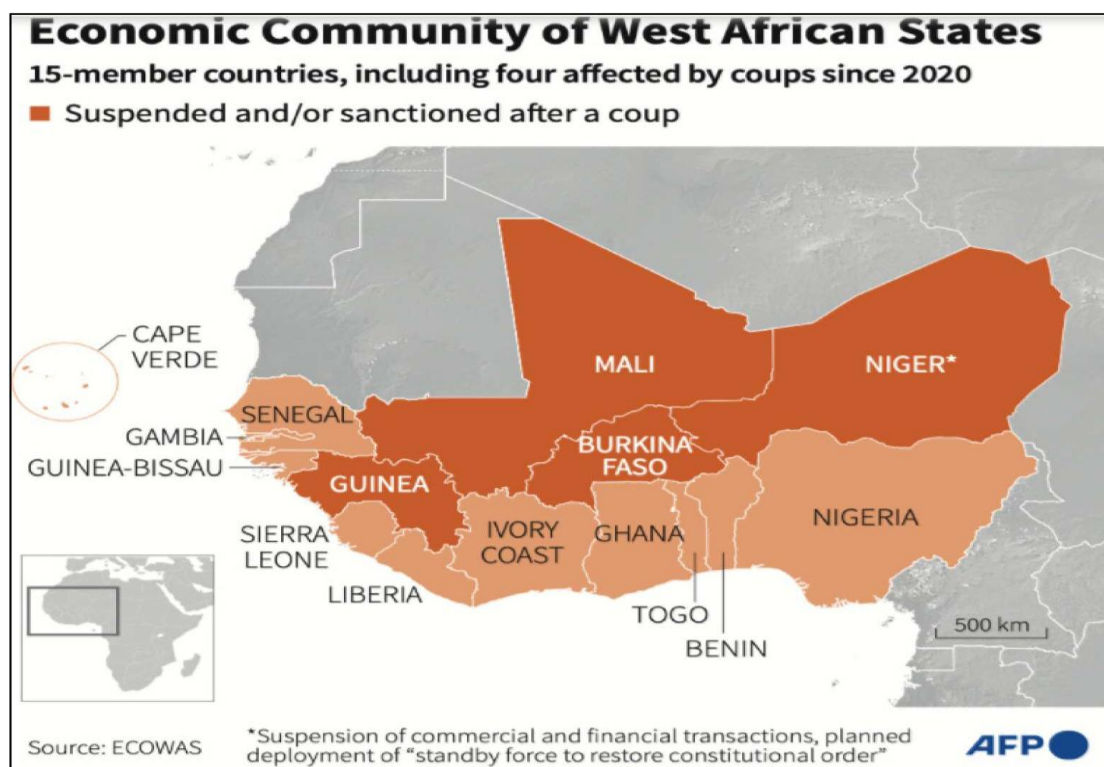


Figure 1: ECOWAS 15 Member Countries, including four affected by Coups between 2020 and 2024. Source: Lenshie (2025).



The establishment of the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) by Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger and their proposed exit of ECOWAS in 2024 underline further rifts within the region and an utter failure of a regionally integrated economy. Due to an abrupt decrease in governmental capabilities, there were numerous jihadist-related deaths in the Sahel between 2020 and 2023. This has led to a military resurgence in the region (Okafor et al., 2024; Lenshie, Okafor & Chinaza, 2025), and recent successful coups in Niger, Burkina Faso, and Mali underscore the consequences of democratic recession and the failure of ECOWAS to manage regional security (Lenshie, 2025). Fisher & Oludemi (2022); Nwedu (2022) and Ojewale (2024) argued that the 2001 Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance of ECOWAS, which was created to stop illegal takeovers of power, is not consistently enforced and has a poor capability for resolving conflicts. Significant geopolitical shifts led Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger to turn away from France and the US and formed the Alliance for the Sahel (AES), which is supported by China and Russia (Oluyemi 2025).

This realignment has significantly increased international tensions between France, the US, Russia, China, and the UK in competition through security cooperation, infrastructure investment, and political alliances (Kumafan, Ahmed, and Oluwaseun 2024; Olisah et al., 2024; Lenshie et al. 2025). Consequently, the three juntas' exit from ECOWAS and merger into AES significantly altered regional governance, diminished ECOWAS's authority, and bolstered authoritarian options while encouraging other coup attempts across the region (Kipo-Sunyehzi and Lambon 2025). According to Okafor et al. (2024), coups have the potential to destabilize neighbouring states, increasing displacement, generating cross-border conflict, and impairing the collective capacity to address shared security challenges.

Initiatives for regional security such as the Multinational Joint Task Force, which depend on member states working together to handle shared dangers, are weakened by this fragmentation (Okafor et al., 2024). Additionally, this has increased the level of insecurity in the Sahel and Lake Chad Basin, worsening the security situation. Terrorist and violent extremist groups such as Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) have taken advantage of weak institutional capacity, especially security gaps, at the borders of the Liptako-Gourma zone and Lake Chad Basin (Ojewale, 2024; Lenshie, Okafor & Chinaza, 2025). The growing threat of terrorism in West Africa has raised security concerns. Weak governance, ungoverned borders, and socioeconomic grievances are used by the Islamic State of the Greater Sahara (ISGS), Al-Qaeda terrorist organizations in the Sahel, and Boko Haram in the Lake Chad Basin and Nigeria. There is a major humanitarian consequence from the protracted war. Increased instability in the Lake Chad Basin has resulted in millions of internally displaced people (IDPs) (Ogbue et al., 2024), worsening regional humanitarian conditions and requiring international action (Ofongo, 2024).

It is not just the security issues but also crucial policies of the region to integrate. Even though an ECOWAS Protocol (Article 59 of 1993 ECOWAS revised Treaty) was established discussing a visa-free and borderless economic community, the documented and undocumented migrants face expulsion, border blockage, and restriction of doing business due to xenophobic treatment in the sub-region. The anti-immigrant policies enforced by the member states exclude the Community citizens, who are almost never the exception (Aniche, 2022). Xenophobia consciousness has been fostered and maintained by the political elite in different states and helps them to securitize their power base and



impedes the development of class consciousness. Such policies of xenophobia have provided the needed environment to slow down the process of the ECOWAS Protocol (Aniche, 2022).

In spite of the fact that ECOWAS free movement protocol is a binding agreement among the member states, the protocol has been experiencing performance-crippling challenges among member states. The contemporary intrastate stringent, cumbersome, and annoying border procedures have become a problem to commuters (Iwuoha and Mbaegbu, 2021; Aniche et al. 2022; Iwuoha, 2025). As per the estimate, about 53 percent of the ECOWAS region population lack legal identity and proof of registration (World Bank, 2020; Iwuoha, 2025). Most of the Fulani herders because of their regular cross-border movements and whose lineage and ethnicity cuts across various nationalities boundaries in the West Africa regions lack valid identification and documentation (Iwuoha, 2025).

The absence of the coordinated immigration and emigration policies in the West Africa region has enabled the border officers to exercise their corrupt behaviors such as unnecessary taxation and extortion of money, and harassment of people at their borders and ports (Ibeanu, 2007; Iwuoha, 2020; Iwuoha, 2025). Freedom of movement has also been hindered by the mounting of countless checkpoints and barriers by the National Police and Custom officials on trans-boundary roads of which an estimation of 120 security and border checkpoints have been mounted in the alone between Badagry and the Benin border (Iwuoha, 2025). The harm caused by the insecurity in the western Africa region is catastrophic to the social-economic and political growth, such as hunger, poverty, and displacement of the population, which are a result of the war events (Akran and Udeagbala, 2022).

The varying histories, political structures and social-economic issues coupled with foreign reliance and interference in West Africa have been prime factors in the recurring instability that has been experienced with spill-over risks in West Africa which have posed problems to the regional power ECOWAS (Herpolsheimer, 2024). The nexus between migration and conflict has heightened banditry and violent conflicts in the West African borderlands whose problems are part of the anthropogenic transformation of the zone in terms of its climate competence and its relation to the migration pattern given the scarcity of resources on which the competing groups (herders and farmers) depend in Nigeria (Aniche et al., 2023). Increased migration and security cooperation between European governments and West Governments is proving to be an essential intervention and especially in such a context of border criminality due to the large number of porous borders in the sub-region and due to the skyrocketing migration syndrome which has hitherto taken root among the youth living in the sub-region (Iwuoha, 2025).

4.2. ECOWAS's Responses, Effectiveness and Regional Instability in West Africa

Violent extremism in the Sahel has become one of the major issues affecting countries in West Africa and the inability of ECOWAS to aptly respond to the issue can be attributed to the dynamic nature of security threats posed which have created new challenges and put in place the unchanging norms and response structures to the test (ISS, 2019). Though ECOWAS is acknowledged as an early pioneer in the field of conflict intervention in the region, free movement of goods and people, and self-financing through its community levy (Herpolsheimer, 2024), the group is currently struggling to overcome other global issues posed by organized crime syndicates, human trafficking and extremism. ECOWAS transformed non-interference to intervention in conflicts through adopting the 1999 Mechanism since



then based more on the non-military methodology but with mixed success in achieving desired effects in the region, serving to enhance regional identity and cohesion (Herpolsheimer, 2024).

The major success of the organization is that it has managed to develop well-rounded normative and policy frameworks since the Mechanism of 1999, which has influenced the response to conflict, democracy, and governance and has given benchmarks to the civil society and international community (Herpolsheimer, 2024). The security architecture of ECOWAS is being organized in such a way that it deals with transnational threats with a mixture of military, diplomatic, and non-military measures. The 1999 Protocol established the Mediation and Security Council, which gave the authority of peacekeeping and resolution of conflicts and the seeing the light of the day of 2001 Protocol brought the norms to stop about unconstitutional changes of governance, a major cause of insecurity (ECOWAS, 1999; ECOWAS, 2001).

The 2008 ECOWAS Conflict Prevention Framework (ECPF) focuses more on preventive diplomacy, mediation and security sector reform with the assistance of the ECOWAS Early Warning and Response Network (ECOWARN) in order to timely detect conflicts (ECOWAS, 2008). The ECOWAS Standby Force (ESF) is ready to be deployed, as well as the efforts on organized crime, like the Organized Crime: West African Response to Trafficking (OCWAR-T), which is aimed at cross-border criminal activity, such as drug trafficking, and gun trafficking (Global Initiative, 2023). The 2025 withdrawal of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger to form the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) has made ECOWAS's problems—such as a lack of funding, political polarization, and dependence on Nigeria's leadership—even worse (ISS, 2025).

The current provision of security as given by the 2012 coup and jihadist insurgency is a major challenge to the security structure of ECOWAS. After the coup ECOWAS slapped sanctions, such as the border closure and freeze of assets and facilitated the formation of a transitional government with President Dioncounda Traor (TDHJ, 2024). Following the coups in 2020 and 2021, ECOWAS intervened. Goodluck Jonathan, the mediator, was able to secure transitional timelines, but the lack of progress led to prolonged sanctions in 2022 (ISS, 2024). Terrorism in Mali especially instigated by organizations, such as Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimeen (JNIM) has so far restricted action against the activities by ECOWAS. With the involvement of the African-led International Support Mission to Mali (AFISMA) and assistance with counter-terrorist training, jihadist fighters occupy large swathes of the country, and 47 percent of worldwide terrorism fatalities in 2023 took place in the Sahel (CFR, 2024).

This is a serious undermining of the counter-terrorism capacities of ECOWAS and an indicator of the inability of the existing security set up to respond to violent extremism. The ungoverned space within Mali is a breeding ground to cross-border crimes such as smuggling arms and drugs as reported in the 2023 West Africa Organized Crime Resilience Framework (OCRf) (Global Initiative, 2023). The OCWAR-T program of ECOWAS has funded criminal investigation but there has been difficulty to organize and fund (Global Initiative, 2023). The fact that these networks remain active is an indication of how the collaborative approach between ECOWAS in terms of combating organized crime falls short. The fact that Mali withdrew from ECOWAS in 2025 has weakened the efforts achieved in the region since it claimed to be dissatisfied with the sanctions imposed upon it, with the AES aligned



with foreign forces such as Russia and China (Chatham House, 2025). Although the diplomatic solutions deployed by ECOWAS have alleviated certain instability in politics, the fact that they have a limited military and anti-crime expertise confirms that more resources are needed in this regard, and this shows how the collaborative security architecture has failed in part to deal with the situation.

The largest member state of ECOWAS is Nigeria and it is usually a powerful point of influence in the security practices of ECOWAS but it tends to focus its resources on national or multilateral action rather than ECOWAS action lead response. Since 2009, the Boko Haram insurgency, which thrives on connected border transgressions and terrorism in the north of Nigeria, has left more than 2,600 dead in 2023 (ISS, 2024). ECOWAS has felt some responsibility toward the counter-terrorism by providing funds as Nigeria has pledged \$100 million of which ECOWAS has managed to commit 20 million to the regional counter-terrorism efforts, however, 80 percent of the idea according to Nigeria goes to the national efforts (ISS, 2024). The Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) formed by Nigeria, Benin, Cameroon, Chad, and Niger has been the notable instrument of dealing with Boko Haram, curbing its dominance within the geographical premises via operations such as Lake Sanity 2 in 2024 (AU, 2024).

This reflects why the inclination of Nigeria in favor of alternative multilateral arrangements is capable of destabilizing collaborative security architecture of ECOWAS. Human trafficking and drug smuggling are other examples of cross-border crimes that are continuously recorded to be common in Nigeria, as it was ranked as a regional hub in these crimes in 2021 on the ENACT Organized Crime Index (Global Initiative, 2023). The Cybercrime Directive of ECOWAS has been in force since 2011 and was created in order to fight internet fraud, yet the lack of enforcement has not allowed it to succeed (Orji, 2019). The example of Lakurawa and other groups in North-West Nigeria since 2016 shows that banditry, terrorism and cross-border crime are interconnected but ECOWAS so far has only responded by helping national efforts (ISS, 2025). The unwillingness of Nigeria to adopt ECOWAS-led programs to the full extent, as was witnessed when the country refused to deploy troops to Niger in 2023, hinders the power of the organization (Obasi, 2023).

The fact that Nigeria dominates and favours self-regulation in Nigeria means that the efficacy of ECOWAS is curtailed in that it requires greater regional coordination, thereby revealing the difficulties in executing collaborative security architecture in cases where a member state is dominant. The Nigerian, Cameroon, Chad and Niger have a complex crisis in Lake Chad Basin that has adversely affected more than 17 million people due to Boko Haram, changes in climate and lawless crimes experienced in the region (Climate-Diplomacy, 2018). Important information about ECOWAS's capacity to handle trans-regional security issues that go beyond its immediate membership is offered by this case study.

The MNJTF has been supported by ECOWAS, and it has led to a number of successful campaigns to decrease the impact of Boko Haram like the great Lake Sanity 2 in 2024 (AU, 2024). Additionally, the organization plays a role in the Regional Strategy for Stabilization, Recovery, and Resilience (RS-SRR) that works on socio-economic causes such as poverty and displacement (Lake Chad Basin Commission, 2018). ECOWARN has improved the gathering of information about transnational security risks, and the Civil-Military Cooperation Cell led by the MNJTF has allowed humanitarian



passage (Eizenga and Gnangueton, 2024). Nevertheless, all these make the effectiveness of ECOWAS limited by a number of very important factors. The exit of Niger as a member of MNJTF in 2024 after being suspended at the ECOWAS level derailed the regional collaboration (ACCORD, 2024). International crimes, such as trafficking in arms and slavery, continue, and the globe and the 2023 OCRF marked the area of the Lake Chad Basin as a hotspot (Global Initiative, 2023). Lake Chad reduced by more than 90 percent since the 1960s due to climate change further complicates insecurity because it causes conflicts over resources as well as recruitment into jihadist movements (Climate-Refugees.org, 2021).

The limited influence of ECOWAS can be attributed to the funding gaps, whereby a requested budget of 2.3 billion USD on counter-terrorism efforts has not been met, as well as the absence of coordination with the AES (ISS, 2024). Though the role of stabilisation and disarmament programs funded by ECOWAS is encouraging, expansion of such efforts will help when more resources and political cohesion are in place. The security system of ECOWAS expresses a mixed success in dealing with terrorism, inter-border crimes, and insecurity when considering the three case studies. The political crisis in Mali has been addressed with the help of diplomatic interventions, although the military presence is weak, and the departure of AES slows down the anti-terrorist and anti-crime operations (Chatham House, 2025). In Nigeria, the responses to the threat led by ECOWAS take a second place to their national and MNJTF-led replies, and the unrelenting cases of terrorism and transnational crimes are symptoms of weak enforcement in the region (ISS, 2025). Lake Chad Basin has demonstrated the capabilities of ECOWAS in facilitating stabilization, yet its ability to take comprehensive action is constrained by funding and political division (Eizenga and Gnangusson, 2024).

The main risks hindering the effectiveness of the cooperative security framework of ECOWAS are: the budget of ECOWAS regarding counter-terror activities is one of the underfunded ones, and the organization is highly dependent on other actors (ISS, 2024). The region has been massively disturbed by unrest, military coups, and economic crisis since 48 years of its existence (before May 28, 2023), which means basic resource and capability limitations (Anderson, 2025). The Division and the suspicion of member states intervene in the sharing of the intelligence and joint endeavors (ISS, 2025). There are still internal divisions that weaken the capacity of the organization to generate harmonized responses to security threats. The ease of the cross-border crimes is facilitated by porous borders, necessitating the enhancement of coordination between it and non-ECOWAS entities (Global Initiative, 2023). The unprecedented new character of war characterized by the labels of insurgency and terrorism is new to the West African region, and even though various structures have been put up to fight off terrorism such as the multi-national joint task force (MNJTF), ECOWAS has failed to lower the bar of insurgents thresholds more especially the Boko Haram terrorists in Nigeria (Akran and Udeagbala, 2022).

In spite of this, successes of the organization in dealing with the regional conflicts have been documented (Megwalu and Garba, 2024). Due to its involvement in a number of conflicts as a result of weak states, ECOWAS is regarded as a historical model of sub-regional integration and human security planning (Okon, 2020). The highly effective creation of the ESF and its excellent use to resolve the Gambian war in 2017 by the organization, resulted in regionally security objectives



accomplished with minimal cost in regards to loss of lives (Okon, 2020). Nevertheless, there are major deficits in the interventions of the organization. In the past years, ECOWAS could easily intervene and regulate conflict in the sub-region without significantly external interference but due to the evolution of the kind of conflict the organization has had to consider its security architecture again (Akran and Udeagbala, 2022).

Security is a significant concern and constant conflicts, terrorism, and political instability are raising threats to regional security. The provision of increased security, such as data sharing, anti-terrorist cooperation, and enhanced peacekeeping mandates, would require a more coordinated effort on this front to achieve longer-range peace and stability (Anderson, 2025).

5.0. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

With the regime of free movement the external borders are literally a hotspot in terms of all type of international organised crime, including smuggling of any kind of goods including stolen cars, cigarettes, drugs, weapons, and nuclear material, illegal immigration, people smuggling and organized prostitution (Philip and Uwa (2022)). The most significant area that will be guaranteed in a bid to prevent and counter/fight organized crime is external borders. ECOWAS has developed its security structure, but it is much more prepared to address certain cases of insecurity than before the creation of the organization, although gaps exist in its implementation (Akran and Udeagbala, 2022).

The organization still struggles with the complicated issue of how to reconcile the need to respect national sovereignty with the need to successfully govern regional security, how to cope with its limited resources against a backdrop of changing threats and how to be united despite the competing interests of member states. This demand to continuously recheck the security architecture in relation to the rising security problems is what continues to give the organization a high rating in performance with respect to security governance within the region.

The collective security system of ECOWAS has succeeded to an extent in combating terrorism, transnational crimes and insecurity in Mali, Nigeria and the Lake Chad Basin. Its diplomatic and stabilization operations give the basis of region security, nonetheless, it is less effective due to a lack of funding, political differences between leaders, and dependability on the country reactions. The importance of strong counter-terrorism capability is highlighted by Mali, the issue of national hegemony is reflected by Nigeria, and interventions on socio-economic aspects are manifested in the Lake Chad Basin. The assessment shows that though certain normative frameworks have been established by ECOWAS and have supported effective operation such as MNJTF (USIP, 2024), their intensive usage of sanctions, lack of civil society involvement, and disintegrated operation provides a sign that fundamental reforms are required.

The study recommends the strengthening of ECOWAS's role in promoting sustainable peace and stability in West Africa and add to the continuing intellectual discussions on regional responses to transnational security concerns. To increase its performance, ECOWAS should obtain sustainable funds, dialogue better with the AES, integrate civil society more and collaborate better with trans-regional institutions such as the MNJTF. Such reforms are crucial in changing the security problems facing West Africa and enhancing the functionality of the organization collaborative security system



in dealing with armed syndicates, and human trafficking and terrorism groups. The response to the complex security threats that are faced by the region should change the current reactive stance taken by the organization and adopt proactive approaches that are supported by appropriate resources and are politically united.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that no conflict of interest exist in this manuscript.

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