Terrorism in West Africa: Real, emerging or imagined threats?

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This essay locates the West African region in the context of the post-9/11 discourses on terrorism and counter-terrorism, particularly as it relates to the global war on terror. It identifies and analyses the issues and challenges that flow from the integration of West Africa into hegemonic transnational/globalised security arrangements, and the ways in which the emerging state (militaristic) and globalised security framework could reinforce or, paradoxically, undermine regional, intranational human and environmental security in one of Africa’s most troubled regions. It critically examines the possibility of a terrorist threat in the region and analyses the global stakes involved in integrating West Africa into the global war on terror. On this basis, it concludes that zero-sum, militarist, globally driven solutions may fail to address the historical, political, and socio-economic roots of a possible terrorist threat in West Africa.

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Introduction

Since the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the United States (US), and terrorist attacks in Africa, Europe and Asia, it has become obvious that in a globalising world, such attacks can come from anywhere, assume any form and can target Western military, strategic or economic interests and citizens (or allies) abroad. Thus, protection from terrorism involves complex operations on a global scale. This much has been the cornerstone of the defence and foreign policies of the George W Bush presidency in the US, its closest ally, the British government under Prime Minister Tony Blair, the G-8 countries, the European Union (EU), and their allies across the world.

This essay seeks to locate the West African region in the context of the construction and representation of global security, particularly as it relates to the post-9/11 global discourses on terrorism and counter-terrorism. It also identifies and analyses the critical challenges that flow from the integration of West Africa into the ‘global war on terror’, and the ways in which the emerging militarised and globalised security complex may reinforce or, paradoxically, undermine regional, intranational human and environmental security in one of Africa’s most troubled regions.

Although no terrorist strike has occurred in West Africa (unlike East and North Africa), security strategists, scholars and policymakers are concerned that, given historical and cultural factors and the political instability, poverty, socio-economic and governance crises and conflicts that have ravaged the region, it could be potentially vulnerable to terrorism. Of particular note are the ‘networked wars’ of the 1990s that ravaged Liberia and Sierra Leone and involved neighbouring states, and the outbreak of civil war in Guinea-Bissau between 1998 and 1999 and in Côte d’Ivoire in 2002.

Although peace has returned to West Africa (even as an uneasy truce holds sway in Côte d’Ivoire), it remains fragile. As Nigeria, the region’s most populous country and economic powerhouse, approaches general elections in 2007, there are also concerns that political instability largely driven by zero-sum games for power involving the manipulation of ethnic, religious and communal identities, could take a turn for the worse and threaten regional security. The escalation of violence in the Niger Delta – the main oil-producing region in Nigeria – has also attracted international attention. Attacks on oil installations and security forces, the abduction of expatriate oil workers, the stealing of oil from pipelines and the operations of militant and armed groups intent on controlling oil revenues in the region are widely seen as a threat to the West’s energy security. Thus, as one of Africa’s most unstable regions, as well as a rapidly expanding source of oil and gas for the US, and to a lesser extent, Europe and Asia (particularly China), the stakes in the security of West Africa have become very high, and the need to prevent it from becoming a site for terrorist attacks against Western interests never greater.
The concern of the US in focusing on this region is impelled by several broad considerations:

- Its openness and perceived lack of effective governance or secure borders;
- A need to integrate the region into a US-controlled global security framework;
- The region at present provides 15 per cent of US oil imports and this is expected to increase to 25 per cent within a decade;
- The possibility of recruiting locals in the ‘Muslim Belt’ to terrorist cells; and
- Opportunities to launder or move large amounts of money using the cross-border trade in ‘blood diamonds’, timber and arms, and to raise funds within the state of chaos of conflict or emerging post-conflict zones.

Critics argue that the terrorist threat in West Africa has been exaggerated to fit into Washington’s hegemonic global security agenda. It appears that the terrorist threat that has pre-occupied the attention of strategic and policy planners has been largely constructed around political/radical Islam, oil, and the stereotype of weak, failed or failing African states. Although no compelling evidence of terrorism has been found, West Africa is thus writ large in the emerging post-Cold War transnational geo-strategic and energy security calculations.

As far back as 1999, Article 3 of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) Protocol for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peace Keeping and Security had identified the tackling of international terrorism as one of the objectives for regional cooperation. However, since 9/11, cooperation between the US, EU and ECOWAS (and individual member states) has grown. The concern with terrorism in West Africa has therefore been framed not only in global terms, but also as the reserve of ‘high politics’ involving the political elite, military top brass, ministers, heads of state and the regional economic organisation, ECOWAS.

Thus, to some extent the relevance of the West African connection to the war on terror transcends the concern with internal security. It also attempts to collectively address the ‘globalisation’ of the region’s security. However, in doing this much emphasis lies on the institutional and military approaches to anti-terrorist and defence arrangements, while little attention is focused on providing the national and international resources badly needed for addressing the harsh political and desperate socio-economic conditions that may provide the nourishment for dissent, violence, repression, proliferation of small arms and highly mobile youth fighters, and possibly, terror. Terrorism in West Africa therefore lies more in the realm of possibilities and/or
perceptions of potential threats in a region that is being further opened up to global influences and transnational actors.

**Terrorism: Some conceptual issues**

Terrorism is a highly contested concept. It therefore can be ‘flexibly constructed’ to suit ideological, nationalist, propagandist and political objectives. With its origins in revolutionary political violence, it is now associated with an illegal unconventional war against a society or against an established, but resented, order. Thus, while terrorism could be intended to attract attention to a cause through acts of extreme violence/threat of violence and spreading grief and fear, it could also be used as a label by status quo forces to excoriate and demonise their opponents or those struggling against domination and exploitation.

The history of modern terrorism is often traced back to the ‘Red Terror’ during the French Revolution in the 18th century, and the spread of similar tactics to the rest of Europe and then the US and Russia, often in the service of nationalist and anarchic goals. In the 20th century, terrorism became more sophisticated and spread throughout the world. In agreement with Schmid, Jongman et al, it would be apposite in our context to note that “terrorism is an anxiety-inspiring method of repeated violent action, employed by (semi) clandestine individual, groups, or state actors, for idiosyncratic, criminal, or political reasons, whereby – in contrast to assassination – the direct targets of violence are not the main targets”.2

In a globalising world, ‘new’ terrorist networks have also become more sophisticated, mobile and trans-global in their operations: moving resources, conventional and unconventional weapons, recruiting operatives, planning and co-ordinating their activities within, and across national borders. Apart from the use of civilian aeroplanes in the tragic 9/11 attacks, terrorists have also used dangerous chemicals and gases (such as Sarin gas, used by Aum Shinrikyo in the Tokyo March 1995 subway attacks), suicide bombers and biological weapons such as anthrax. Increasingly they have targeted and bombed civilians – tourists, bus and train commuters, hotels/tourist resorts, public buildings and air travellers -while largely avoiding military installations and infrastructure.

At present, the discourse on global terrorism is largely framed with reference to threats posed to Western society by al-Qaeda and the groups sympathetic to it, as well as to the activities of extremist political and nationalist groups operating across the world. Yet, there is a sense in which the conceptualisation of terrorism, and by implication counter-terrorism, could become an ideological construct that is embedded in history and international politics. This is precisely the point made by Mamdani,3 based on his observation that the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), working with other foreign
agencies, provided support to al-Qaeda during the later part of the Cold War, when the latter was involved in fighting against the pro-Soviet Union regime in Afghanistan. What flows from this is that the conceptualisation of terrorism should be both nuanced and placed in context.

The current focus on West Africa is partly informed by the centrality of Africa to emerging global security discourses. Although the continent had been victim of the 1998 terrorist bombings of the US embassies in Dar es Salaam and Nairobi in which over 200 people were killed, it was not until the September 2001 attacks in the US, and in the face of the prioritisation of Africa’s oil in US strategic energy calculations, that the continent – and by extension, West Africa – became integrated into the US-led ‘global war on terror’. It is important that West Africa’s place in the emerging discourse on global terrorism should be situated within an African context that places a premium on Africa’s interests and priorities. This is pertinent partly because the current debates tend to be almost exclusively framed within Western paradigms that represent Africa as a source of threats to Western society which should be integrated into a hegemonic framework of global security. Therefore a conceptual discussion of terrorism in West Africa must include a radical analysis of the integration of the region into the global war on terror, and provide an African perspective to the emerging discourse on global security.

West Africa in the context of the ‘global war on terror’

“We can’t allow areas like that to be ungoverned, to become a haven for terrorists.”

The above statement, credited to the deputy commander of the US European Command (EUCOM) (that also covers Africa), encapsulates the current US perspective of its national security interest in the Saharan and Sahelian belts of West Africa. West Africa is one of the global sites for the US’s war on terror, involving both governments of the region and ECOWAS in a counter-terrorism partnership with the US and its G-8 allies. Critical to this partnership is US interest in ensuring that terrorist groups do not find sanctuary, raise funds, recruit terrorists and operate from this region. Another consideration is the need to protect vital Western and US strategic and energy security interests in the region. In this regard the US launched the Pan Sahel Initiative (PSI), aimed at training 150 soldiers each from Mali, Mauritania, Niger and Chad. These were countries believed to harbour extremist groups likely to be linked to the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC) in Algeria.

The PSI was followed by the Trans-Sahara Counter Terrorism Initiative (TSCTI) at an estimated cost of approximately US$120 million. Apart from building up regional defence and security capacities, the TSCTI aimed to “train additional forces, include
more countries and help foster better information sharing and operational planning between regional states, considered as important as creating new units.5 The TSCTI then expanded its coverage to include Algeria, Tunisia, Morocco, Senegal, Ghana and Nigeria. Its focus has been largely on training soldiers from these countries, providing military assistance in the form of both hardware and software, preventing the spread of extremist forms of Islam and securing national and regional borders. Rear Admiral Tallent, director of operations for the US European Command, said before the US House Sub-committee on International Terrorism and Non-proliferation that “we are supporting US national security in the global war on terrorism by enhancing Africa’s regional security, thus promoting an Africa that is self-sufficient and stable”.6

The same thinking underlies the African Contingency Operations Training Assistance (ACOTA), which replaced the African Crises Response Initiative (ACRI). It specifically designs tailor-made programmes for individual African states (militaries) in the areas of security, humanitarian and peacekeeping operations. Such training is handled by US military and US private military/security companies and involves the use of US military technology and hardware. Part of the US policy thrust is also to build facilities and bases (airports, ports, buildings) in West Africa from which the US military can launch missions in the region.7 It would appear, then, that the US and West Africa share a common interest in the fight against global terror. This may be so, but it is also clear that the ‘partnership’ is an unequal one in which the US is clearly the dominant party. This raises the critical point of West African states being held captive by external security interests and projects that may undermine the long-term interests of the region and its people. However, the reality is that US-West African counter-terrorism initiatives exist and are probably here to stay. What remains is to deepen the analysis of the considerations that drive and sustain this partnership and its short- to long-term implications.

West Africa’s fragile peace and the risk of regression to violent conflict

The US-led counter-terrorism initiatives in West Africa are partly informed by the view that societies in conflict or just emerging from civil wars are vulnerable to infiltration or capable of harbouring transnational criminal networks and terrorists. Such views have been strengthened by the connection drawn between the illegal trade in conflict diamonds in West Africa at the peak of the civil wars in Liberia and Sierra Leone, and the funding of terrorist networks linked to al-Qaeda. According to a report on the UN-supported War Crimes Court in Sierra Leone, which quoted the head prosecutor in Freetown:

Certainly, al-Qaeda have been here for a couple of years and they have been using diamonds to wash their money and so, yes, they certainly have a presence here. There’s specific and direct evidence to that effect.8
A report in the *Washington Post* also noted that the former Liberian president, Charles Taylor, collaborated with al-Qaeda operatives involved in the trade in 'blood diamonds'. Taylor is at present in The Hague awaiting trial following his transfer from Sierra Leone after his arrest in Nigeria. This was after the new Liberian president, Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, following concerted US pressure, requested his extradition to the Sierra Leonean court. Until Taylor’s trial commences, it may not be possible to evaluate the extent of al-Qaeda involvement in the Mano River area of West Africa.

Also, rebel groups reported to be operating in the northern fringes of Mauritania, Mali, Niger and Chad have been linked to possible terrorist infiltration from North Africa. Such fears have been heightened by rebel activity in Chad with occasional incursions across Nigeria’s northeastern borders, by the Darfur crisis in Sudan, and by insurgency linked to Tuareg groups in Mali and Niger. The US is determined to keep a very close watch on the region and build up the capacity of the armies and police forces in West Africa to nip terrorist threats in the bud.

The fragility of post-conflict West African states has contributed to the use of peacebuilding as part of the counter-terrorism process. So far, most of the attention and resources have gone into security sector reforms, building up military and intelligence capacities, while international interventionism in relation to post-conflict peace-building and reconstruction appears to fail to tackle the complex roots of the multiple crises rocking the region. Also, such interventionism is often strategic and vertical, excluding the grassroots and often undermining social justice, democratic consolidation, economic redistribution and growth. This suggests that that the current partnerships, which hinge on the prognosis that weak or distressed states and conflict societies are vulnerable to terrorist infiltration and that states and governance should be strengthened to contain the threat, very often neglect the socio-economic and historical inequities that lie at the roots of most violent conflicts or wars.

**West Africa and global energy security**

A critical consideration underlining counter-terrorism measures in West Africa is the existence of substantial US and Western oil interests and investments in the region. The region accounts for 15 per cent of all US oil imports and it is projected that this will increase to 25 per cent by 2020. Leading US policymakers, energy and strategic analysts have emphasised the centrality of oil from West and Central Africa, dubbed the ‘New Gulf States’ in the media, to US efforts to diversify oil supplies from the Middle East and secure steady supplies of oil and gas against a background of declining domestic oil production in the US. The reasons for this lie in the proximity of Africa to US oil markets and the fact that most of the oil Africa produces is of the light, ‘sweet’ variety, with a low sulphur content that is favoured by US refineries. Also, more oil is being
discovered and produced off-shore in the Gulf of Guinea and Western oil companies have vast investments in the region that guarantee jobs and profits to shareholders. With growing domestic demand in the US – and dependence on imported oil to satisfy about half of domestic demand – it has become important to secure new sources of oil from across the world. Part of the calculus is also to diversify US dependence on oil supplies from the volatile Middle East and to pre-empt the likely strategic implications of growing Chinese demand for oil imports from African and other international producers.

Another important consideration is the protection of offshore oil installations and international sea-lanes in West Africa from the activities of international criminal and terrorist networks. This much was confirmed recently by Admiral Henry G Ulrich, commander of the US Naval Forces in Europe and Africa, in response to reporters’ questions at a symposium in Abuja, Nigeria. Thus, an unfettered access to West African oil is critical to Western energy security and global power. Western oil interests are also locked into major oil-producing countries such as Nigeria, Angola, Gabon and the ‘new oil boom states’ – Chad, Equatorial Guinea, and São Tome and Principe. Since most of the oil being discovered is off-shore, it has the added advantage of being beyond the reach of protesting oil communities on land who are capable of disrupting the oil flow, as has been the case in the restive oil-rich Niger Delta in Nigeria since the early 1990s.

According to the African Oil Policy Initiative Group (AOPIG) Report, quoting the US Assistant Secretary of State, Walter Kansteiner III: “African oil is critical to us, and it will increase and become more important as we go forward.” Apart from guaranteeing stable supplies of oil to the expanding oil-guzzling US market, it gives the US the leeway to promote its values of free markets, regional economic growth, good governance and democracy, which would influence regional stability and peace in ways that broadly favour US hegemonic interests and security.

US oil corporations have been in the vanguard of the new scramble for West Africa’s oil. They recognise the need to compete more against their European counterparts, such as Royal Dutch Shell, Total, BP and ENI (Agip), as well as Chinese oil companies that are aggressively seeking a foothold in the region. US oil multinationals such as Exxon Mobil and Chevron Texaco have been the visible frontrunners in the quest for new oil finds in West Africa. Gary and Karl note that: “Chevron Texaco announced in 2002 that it had invested $5 billion in the past five years in African oil and would spend $20 billion more in the next five years,” and “Exxon Mobil signified its intention to spend $15 billion in Angola in the next four years, and $25 billion across Africa in the next decade.”

In addition, both Exxon Mobil and Chevron Texaco were investing billions of dollars in Nigeria, the fifth largest exporter of oil to the US, accounting in 2002 for 600,000 barrels per day of US oil imports. Chevron Texaco was also involved in developing the oil and gas fields in Equatorial Guinea, while Exxon Mobil had cornered the São Tome
and Principe oil and gas fields. The 1,070 km Chad-Cameroon oil pipeline, carrying oil from the Doba oilfields in Chad for export through the Cameroon port of Kribi, is reportedly the largest single US private investment in Africa by Exxon Mobil, valued at US$3.7 billion. Other sources, however, put the investments by Exxon Mobil (which owns 40 per cent of the equity, followed by Petronas of Malaysia with 35 per cent and Chevron Texaco with 25 per cent) at US$2.2 billion. Whatever the real figures are, it shows a pronounced US oil multinational presence in Chad.

Other US oil interests include the West African Gas Pipeline Project (WAGP), valued at US$500 million, to transport an estimated 120 million cubic feet per day of gas to Ghana, Benin and Togo from Nigeria’s Niger Delta by 2005, over a distance of 1,033 km. According to the Energy Information Association, the oil consortium that has invested in the WAGP is led by Chevron Texaco (36.7 per cent), and includes Shell (18 per cent), the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC) (25 per cent), Ghana’s National Petroleum Corporation (GNPC) and Volta River Authority (VRA) (16.3 per cent), Benin’s Société Béninoise de Gaz SA (SoBeGaz)(2 per cent) and Togo’s Société Togolaise de Gaz SA (SoToGaz)(2 per cent). The WAGP is central to plans for power generation and industrialisation along the West African coastal corridor and could be extended further, possibly as far as Senegal, given the right security and economic conditions. The US, other Western countries and China also have interests in Senegal, Mauritania, Ghana, Côte d’Ivoire, Togo and Cameroon, where their oil companies are involved in the search for oil.

What flows from the foregoing is the reality that the security stakes of the US and the West are very high in West Africa. The possibility that terrorists can infiltrate oil-rich but unstable or weak states impels the urge to intervene to promote US security interests in the region. The US Navy has established a presence in the Gulf of Guinea, largely to protect international sea-lanes for transporting oil and gas, and keep a watchful eye on oil interests along the coast, particularly in the Niger Delta where ethnic minority militants have periodically attacked oil company installations and workers and disrupted the flow of oil.

**Nigeria’s troubled oil-rich Niger Delta region**

Since the 1990s there has been an upsurge in the agitation in Nigeria’s volatile Niger Delta. The protests in this paradoxically oil-rich but impoverished region have been largely targeted at the Nigerian federal government and the oil multinationals, which are accused of neglect, exploitation and the environmental degradation of the region. They hit the global limelight in the early 1990s when Ken Saro-Wiwa, the charismatic writer, environmental and ethnic minority rights activist, led the Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP) in a campaign against the Nigerian state and Shell,
the largest multinational oil operator in Nigeria. MOSOP’s demands were contained in the Ogoni Bill of Rights (OBR) in 1990 and its Addendum in 1991. The use of the OBR to make demands on the state in a non-violent manner was very much in line with a tradition borrowed from the history of the US. The key OBR demand was for the “right to control and use a fair proportion of Ogoni economic resources for Ogoni development”. Indeed, it was an attempt to (re)take control of the oil-rich land from the state-oil big business alliance.

The MOSOP campaign quickly caught on internationally and Shell came under a lot of pressure. The then Nigerian military government crushed Ogoni resistance through the repression of Ogoni protest and the trial and hanging of Saro-Wiwa and eight other MOSOP activists in November 1995. However it failed to stem the tide of protests and violence in the Niger Delta as other communities confronted oil companies and each other. At the fore were the militant Ijaw youth. The Ijaw could be found across the Niger Delta and saw themselves as the fourth largest ethnic group in Nigeria. In December 1998 the Ijaw Youth Council (IYC) released the Kaiama Declaration in which it claimed ownership of the oil in Ijawland and “advised all oil companies’ staff and contractors to withdraw from Ijaw territories by the 30th of December 1998, pending the resolution of the issue of resource ownership and control of the Ijaw area of the Niger Delta”. In response, the federal government declared a state of emergency in the region and thousands of soldiers, naval troops and anti-riot policemen were deployed to the Niger Delta to protect oil installations and investments and disperse Ijaw protesters. Many of the protesters, and those suspected of being IYC members or supporters, were arrested and some were killed.

However, other incidents deepened tensions. In May 1999 Chevron Texaco allegedly transported Nigerian military personnel in its helicopters from which they shot and killed two protesters on Chevron Texaco’s Parabe oil platform. In November of the same year federal troops razed the oil-producing town of Odi to the ground after the community had failed to produce a criminal gang suspected of murdering seven policemen. According to a report, over 2,000 inhabitants of Odi lost their lives and many more were displaced. It was clear that the operation at Odi fitted a regular pattern in which the Nigerian state deployed maximum force to deter and contain threats to oil interests and oil companies in the region.

In spite of the militarisation of the region, it has witnessed the escalation of violent conflict, particularly along communal lines. Shortly before the 2003 elections in Nigeria, there was an escalation of violence in the western Delta city of Warri, involving armed ethnic Ijaw, Urhobo and Itsekiri militia. In 2005, the military sacked Odioma, following a dispute with a neighbouring community, which also involved an oil multinational. Such military campaigns have continued to target communities in the Niger Delta perceived as threats to oil companies or suspected of harbouring armed youth militia.
The atmosphere of tension has been compounded by the massive theft and export of oil from pipelines. This illegal act, locally called ‘oil bunkering’, is believed to involve criminal gangs with connections to highly placed people and access to sophisticated ammunition. According to an estimate, Nigeria lost between US$392 and US$500 million worth of crude oil to illegal oil bunkerers in 2003. It is also believed that illegal bunkering feeds into criminality, corruption, communal violence and the proliferation of arms in the Niger Delta. Profits from this illegal trade provide resources for patrons of the youth militia (usually local politicians or notables), act as an incentive for unemployed youth to embrace a life of criminality and provide the militia groups with resources for the purchase of sophisticated arms.

In spite of heavy military presence under the framework of the Nigerian army’s Operation Restore Hope, violence and conflicts have continued and the security situation remains fragile. More recently, acts of violence by militant groups such as the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND), the Martyrs Brigade and the Niger Delta Volunteer Force (NDVF), including the widely publicised kidnapping of expatriate oil workers and attacks on oil installations, cut Nigeria’s oil production by 25 per cent or an estimated daily loss of $56.7 million in the first quarter of 2006.

It is in the light of the growing tensions in the Niger Delta – particularly the activities of the armed militant ethnic minority/community in spite of the presence of the Nigerian military – that there has been a growing demand for the increased ‘securitisation’ of the region. Such efforts have sought to link the activities of armed militia in the Niger Delta to a ‘terrorist threat’ to the US and Western oil interests. Indeed, a few Western strategists have canvassed for direct military intervention to protect their strategic energy interests in the troubled region, but the approach has remained that of providing assistance to Nigerian security forces operating in the Niger Delta.

It must be emphasised that no terrorist connection has been established in relation to the Niger Delta crises. This is mainly because the tensions and crises in the region are largely the product of a history of injustice, inequality and inequity, the legacy of military dictatorship and the militarisation of the Niger Delta, and the ways in which the globalised political economy of oil predation involving the Nigerian petro-state – its security agencies, oil multinationals and the local elite, through their politics and policies – deepen the social crises and conflicts in the region.

What is at stake is the control and (re)distribution of the benefits from oil production and sales, and how the people of the region can access a substantial part of these benefits. Admittedly most of the people are alienated and bitter and blame the federal state and oil companies for their plight. But it is perhaps more rewarding to approach the issue from the perspective of positively promoting the socio-economic conditions in the region in ways that reflect social and environmental justice, equity and dignity, rather than resort
to further securitisation that would only serve to increase tensions and steer violence in more dangerous directions.

**Militant Islam in West Africa**

West Africa has a substantial Muslim population, as high as 40 per cent in some estimates. Owing to the linkage being drawn between al-Qaeda and radical/militant forms of political Islam that are clearly anti-American/Western, many strategic thinkers and analysts are of the view that Muslims in West Africa may provide a sanctuary for terrorists. Thus, countries in the Sahelian belt that are largely Muslim, including Nigeria, with substantial Muslim populations, have been under very close watch. The focus here is on the Nigerian case. Politicised religion is a highly explosive issue in Nigeria and political elites have manipulated religious differences between a predominantly Muslim north and predominantly Christian south in the pursuit of access to power and resources in a context of socio-economic crises. The conflation of religious with ethnic identities has added an explosive element in a context where the citizenship question remains unsettled and the nation-state largely remains an unresolved question or incomplete project in the eyes of many, who then retreat into the protective shells of their various ethnic/communal (micro) identities.

Another factor in the tensions between ethno-religious groups in Nigeria is the adoption from 2000 of *Sharia* Islamic law by most of the states in northern Nigeria. This move, which contradicted the constitutionally declared secularity of the Nigerian state, heightened tensions between Christians living in the north and the majority Muslim northerners. It must be noted, however, that the adoption of *Sharia* in northern Nigeria is in part a political project that depends to a large extent on the religious faith of the Muslim majority, who are critical of decades of misrule, poverty and corrupt rulers. It is based on the calculation of the elite that it would provide renewed legitimacy for them and protect the region from opposition politics linked to the age-old fears of southern (Christian) domination. For these reasons, the Islam practised in the northern states is not radical or militant. Although militant groups exist, they are small, limiting their activities to known preachers or leaders and areas. Mostly found in cities and tapping into the grievances of the poor, unemployed and the youth, these groups have been involved in sporadic protests such as those against the US invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 and the hosting of the Miss World beauty pageant in Abuja in 2002. It is believed that Muslim students in higher institutions of learning are involved in the rather episodic upsurge in militant Islam in northern Nigeria. Although most of the religious violence has taken place in north and central Nigeria, it does not preclude the existence of violence in the south involving militant or vigilante groups like the O’Odua Peoples Congress in the west, and the Bakassi Boys and the Movement for the Sovereign State of Biafra in the east.
Most critical, however, have been the activities since late 2003 of a militant group referred to as the “Taliban” in north-east Nigeria, particularly in Borno and Yobe states. This group, suspected of being affiliated to the Al Sunna Wal Jamma, has been involved in attacks on police stations and other government offices and in the murder of police officers and civilians in 2004.29 Militant Muslim university and polytechnic students reportedly formed the group that reportedly models itself after the Taliban of Afghanistan. Others believe that a fugitive Afghan Taliban leader in Nigeria established it. In September 2004, one of the group’s camps was routed in a raid by a combined team of police and the military. Located within the Sahel and the southern-most limits of the Sahara, northern Nigeria falls within the region perceived as being vulnerable to becoming a terrorist sanctuary. Also, the arming and training of militant groups in Nigeria has been traced to funding from groups in Saudi Arabia, radical Islamic countries, and to the activities of militant Islamic preachers or even members of terrorist networks operating along the trans-Sahara routes.

From the foregoing, it is not difficult to fathom why there are concerns that northern Nigeria could become an incubating site for militant Islam and possibly terrorism. However, it would appear that some of the claims about the existence of a terrorist threat are overstated. This is because Islam in northern Nigeria is largely conservative and welded into traditional structures and cultures. Militant groups are relatively few and exist on the fringes of society where they are also visible. However, the existence of deep poverty, youth unemployment and misery across the region, as well as the uneasy relations between the dominant religions and between ‘indigenes’ and ‘settlers’, needs to be attended to urgently to avert the further worsening of the crises.

**Conclusion**

This essay has perhaps raised more questions than answers. However, West Africa is being further integrated on the basis of perceived threats into a US-framed global security system in a globalising, unipolar post-Cold War world, with direct implications for the people of the region. Through this ‘partnership’ West African states have been co-opted into hegemonic external counter-terrorism discourses. In concrete terms, this implies closer military cooperation between the region and the West, but without a corresponding closing of the yawning gap between the prosperous West and the economically marginalised and impoverished West Africa. It appears that the region’s place in the post-Cold War world order remains one of continued subordination to the imperial powers in the international system. The dominant discourse plays down the contributions of hegemonic external interests in the creation of the “same” threats from which Western society seeks to protect itself, without addressing the roots of the crises in West Africa.

In reality, the roots of globalised terror lie outside Africa. Mamdani, in a rather provocative book, places the roots of political terror in the “unfinished business of the
Cold War”. He argues that the transition from political Islam to terror was born out of the history of political Islam and its connections with the US Cold War strategy of rolling back communism in Afghanistan, Central America and Southern Africa. Terrorism in the post-Cold War era is globalised and targets a dominant system of global power. This raises questions about whether an all-out zero sum military victory can be won against such an adversary, or if it is more rewarding to tackle the historical and socio-economic roots of political terror.

What is most significant about the fragile conditions in West Africa and the region’s vulnerability to terrorist infiltration and attacks may not be the questions of whether or not the threats are real or imagined. It lies more in the implications of zero-sum militarist top-down globally driven solutions that may fail to address the asymmetries of power, and the historical, political and social-economic roots of violent conflict and crises in the region. Such a failure would increase the probability that the war on terror in the region would miss its target and possibly end up empowering state security in ways that increasingly contradict human, environmental and social security. It could also increase the risk that governments would pander to the dictates of external constituencies and agendas that undermine local popular-democratic aspirations, and regional peace and development.

Notes

5 Ibid.
11 Ibid.
14 I Gary and T Karl, Bottom of the barrel: Africa’s oil boom and the poor, Catholic Relief Services, Maryland, 2003, p 12.
16 Ibid, p 53.
17 Reuters, Chad, Cameroon lay oil pipeline foundation stones, reported in <http://forests.org/arcgive/Africa/chcamlay.htm> (14 April 2005).