Joint Master in Global Economic Governance and Public Affairs

Assessing the Efficacy of ECOWAS Counterterrorism Strategy and Implementation Framework in the Sahel Region: A Decade of Regional Response to Extremism

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STATUTORY DECLARATION

Candidate's Declaration:

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Signed: Julius Nyerere Gbowee   Date: July 26, 2025

DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to my beloved mother, Leabeh Gboko Gbowee. Her unwavering faith in me and constant support have been the foundation of my academic journey. She made sure I always had what I needed, whether I was at home or abroad, even when things were tough.

Thank you to my sister Rose, my father Allen M. Gbowee, and my grandmother - Nana Rose - for always being there for me and giving me love and strength during this time.

This work is also dedicated to the 4,794 people who died in 2024 because of violence related to terrorism in the Sahel. May their memory inspire a new dedication to peace and security in the region.

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Abstract

This Thesis critically assesses the efficacy of the ECOWAS Counter-Terrorism Strategy (ECTS) and Implementation Framework in combating violent extremism in the Sahel region from 2015 to 2025. With countries like Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Nigeria, and Senegal dealing with increasing attacks, state fragility, and transnational security threats, the Sahel has become the new global epicenter of terrorism in the last 10 years. In response, a multifaceted counterterrorism framework with a focus on prevention, enforcement, and reconstruction was introduced by ECOWAS. This study evaluates how effective the ECOWAS counterterrorism framework's implementation has been across the last decade and its impact on regional stability.

The study employs a mixed-methods approach based on Institutionalism and Regional Security Complex Theory. Qualitative data were extracted through review of regional policy framework, analysis of inter-state relations, and historical and current trends while quantitative data from ECOWARN, the Global Terrorism Index (GTI), and other sources were used to support a qualitative survey and interviews done with 35 stakeholders across five West African countries, including ECOWAS officials, national policymakers, civil society actors, and international partners. The results show ten years of partial implementation: even though there has been some progress in intelligence sharing and legal harmonization, there are still major issues, such as low political cohesion, a lack of funding, reliance on external influence, and little involvement from youth and civil society actors.

Crucially, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger's 2024 exit from ECOWAS seriously jeopardizes the framework for counterterrorism in the region by interfering with intelligence and operational coordination. The study concludes that, despite having a sound conceptual foundation, the ECTS is poorly implemented and lacks a long-term, inclusive, and community-driven approach. It offers policy recommendations aimed at improving ECOWAS's institutional capacity, improving youth and civil society inclusion, strengthening national-regional alignment, and realigning international partnerships toward greater regional ownership.

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List of Abbreviations

Economic Community of West African States	ECOWAS
Ecowas Counterterrorism Strategy	ECTS
Ecowas early Warning and Response Network	ECOWARN
Ecowas Conflict Prevention Framework	ECPF
United Nations	UN
African Union	AU
European Union	EU
Group of Five Sahel Countries	G5 Sahel
Global Terrorism Index	GTI
Multinational Joint Task Force	MNJTF
Region Security Complex Theory	RSCT
Jamaat Nasr al-wal Muslimin	JNIM
Islamic State of Iraq and Syria	ISIS
Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa	MUJAO
al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb	AQIM
Islamic State in the Greater Sahara	ISGS
Civil Society Organization	CSO
Non-Governmental Organization	NGO
Alliance of Sahel States	AES

Definition of Key Terms

1.**ECOWAS** – is a regional political and economic union of twelve countries of West Africa (As of July 2025).

2. **ECOWAS Counter Terrorism Strategy** - Refers to the policies, strategies, and operational measures adopted by ECOWAS to prevent, respond to, and mitigate terrorist activities.

3. **Implementation Framework** - The operational guidelines, institutional mechanisms, and policy instruments that turn strategic objectives into actionable programs.

4. **Violent Extremism** – A concept characterized by using violence for political, religious, or social reasons.

6. **Sahel Region** - This is a semi-arid area in Africa that runs south of the Sahara Desert and includes countries like Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Nigeria, Mauritania, and parts of Chad and Senegal.

7. **Alliance of Sahel States**: A sub-regional body within the Sahel region that consists of three countries (Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger) that left the ECOWAS.

7. **Regional Security Architecture** - Refers to the collective institutional, legal, and operational frameworks that enable regional cooperation on security matters.

8. **Efficacy** - Is the ability of a strategy, policy, or intervention to get the desired result in the real world.

9. **Multilateralism** - Is a type of international cooperation in which three or more countries or organizations work together to solve problems that affect the whole world or a specific region.

10. **Stakeholder Engagement** - This is when different groups, like governments, civil society, youth groups, and international partners, are involved in making plans, carrying them out, and judging how well they work.

Introduction

Over the past decade, the Sahel region of West Africa has emerged as one of the most important security hotspots in the world. As of 2023, more than half of all terrorism-related deaths worldwide occur in the Sahel, a region that was previously marginal in the global fight against terrorism and extremism, according to the Global Terrorism Index. Armed groups are taking advantage of porous borders, institutional flaws, and socioeconomic vulnerabilities in nations like Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Nigeria, which are experiencing an alarming rise in violent extremism. A growing humanitarian crisis, mass displacement, a decline in state power, and an increase in civilian casualties are the startling results. The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has emerged as a key player in the counterterrorism initiatives that regional and international actors have launched in response. Through the launched of the 2013 ECOWAS Counter-Terrorism Strategy and Implementation framework, ECOWAS positioned itself as a regional security actor committed to a comprehensive approach anchored in prevention, enforcement, and post-conflict reconstruction.

However, ten years into its operationalization, the efficacy of this framework remains contested. Terrorism in the Sahel has not decreased but rather increased despite the implementation of regional protocols and the existence of institutional mechanisms like ECOWARN. The efficiency of regional coordination is further called into question by the concurrent growth of extremist organizations, military takeovers, and the 2024 exit of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger from ECOWAS. Although ECOWAS has been successful in bringing together political actors and establishing normative frameworks, little empirical knowledge is available regarding how its strategy has been carried out on the ground, how member states have coordinated their national and regional efforts, and what concrete results have been obtained. Existing literature predominantly emphasizes military operations or international-led missions, often overlooking ECOWAS's institutional role and the practical realities of its strategic ambitions. This lack of rigorous evaluation creates a critical gap in knowledge and impedes policy learning and adaptive governance in regional security responses.

By critically evaluating the ECOWAS Counter-Terrorism Strategy and Implementation Framework's efficacy from 2015 to 2025, with an emphasis on its application in five West African - Sahelian member states (Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Burkina Fasi, and Senegal), this study fills that knowledge gap. It aims to assess how internal and external factors, including political instability, resource constraints, institutional coherence, and stakeholder engagement, have affected the strategy's performance in addition to determining whether it has met its declared goals. The study uses a mixed-methods approach, combining semi-structured interviews with regional stakeholders and the analysis of relevant policy documents and terrorism data, based on institutionalism and regional security complex. The central argument advanced is that while ECOWAS has made important progress in setting a regional agenda on counterterrorism, the strategy's fragmented implementation, inadequate funding, and limited inclusivity have undermined its ability to produce measurable security gains in the Sahel.

To structure the inquiry, the thesis is organized as follows: The research problem, theoretical underpinnings, and goals are presented in **Chapter one**. The literature on regionalism, ECOWAS interventions, and counterterrorism in the Sahel is reviewed in **Chapter two**. The study's methodology and data sources are described in **Chapter three**. The results are presented and examined in **Chapter Four and Chapter Five** using the criteria of institutional efficacy, regional cooperation, and implementation outcomes. To improve the future impact of ECOWAS's security frameworks, the paper concludes with a summary of important findings and policy suggestions.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

1.1 Historical and structural causes of terrorism in the Sahel

<u>Colonial Legacy</u>

The historical legacy of colonialism in the Sahel region has been increasingly recognized as a foundational factor contributing to the emergence of terrorism and violent extremism in contemporary West Africa. Scholars such as Mamdani (1996) and Ayoob (2007) argue that colonial administrations in the Sahel, primarily French and British, imposed arbitrary borders, disrupted traditional governance structures, and privileged certain ethnic groups over others, sowing long-term grievances that remain deeply embedded in regional political and social dynamics. The colonial strategy of indirect rule through institutionalized ethnic hierarchies and deepened marginalization, particularly of nomadic and peripheral communities, such as the Tuareg and Fulani, who today are disproportionately represented among both victims and perpetrators of extremist violence has been highlighted as a key factor. (Benjaminsen & Ba, 2009).

The exclusionary governance models established during the colonial era were not dismantled at independence, leading to postcolonial states that inherited fragile legitimacy and weak administrative control over vast, sparsely populated border regions - ideal conditions for the growth of insurgent movements. Scholars like Thurston (2020) and Dowd (2015) highlight how contemporary extremist groups, such as Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), have capitalized on state absence and historical grievances to recruit followers, often framing their narratives around anti-colonial and anti-state rhetoric.

Furthermore, the colonial imposition of Western educational and legal systems marginalized Islamic scholarship and institutions, particularly in regions like northern Mali and Niger, where Islam had been integral to local identity and authority for centuries (Soares, 2005). The weakening of traditional religious authority created a vacuum later filled by radical ideologies imported from the Middle East and North Africa. This religious dislocation, combined with underdevelopment rooted in extractive colonial economic

policies that continue to fuel frustration and radicalization, especially among unemployed youth.

This literature establishes a strong theoretical and historical link between colonial legacies, marked by political exclusion, economic marginalization, and socio-cultural dislocation are the structural conditions that facilitate terrorism in the Sahel today. This colonial inheritance not only shapes the motivations of violent actors but also hampers the capacity of Sahelian states and regional bodies like ECOWAS to respond effectively.

<u>The Spillover Effects of the Arab Spring on Terrorism in the West African Sahel</u>

The 2011 Arab Spring uprisings profoundly altered the security landscape of North Africa and had far-reaching consequences for the West African Sahel, particularly in relation to the rise and diffusion of terrorism. Scholars such as Lounnas (2013) and Bøås & Torheim (2013) argue that the collapse of authoritarian regimes in North Africa, especially the fall of Muammar Gaddafi in Libya, triggered a cascade of destabilizing effects across the Sahel. Libya's post-revolutionary fragmentation led to the uncontrolled dispersal of arms and the return of heavily armed Tuareg fighters, who had previously served in Gaddafi's military. Their reintegration into Mali and Niger not only reignited long-standing separatist tensions but also created fertile ground for jihadist groups to expand their operations under the banner of anti-state resistance.

Weapons looted from Libyan stockpiles flooded illicit networks and armed non-state actors across the Sahel region. According to Walther and Christopoulos (2015), this unprecedented access to military-grade weapons significantly increased the operational capabilities of terrorist organizations such as Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), MUJAO, and later the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS). These groups capitalized on state fragility and regional governance vacuums, particularly in northern Mali, where the 2012 Tuareg rebellion and subsequent jihadist takeover of key cities underscored the direct and indirect impact of the Arab Spring spillover.

The ideological momentum generated by the Arab Spring uprisings provided new narratives for radical groups to exploit. While the original movements were largely secular and democratic in character, extremist factions reinterpreted the collapse of regimes as a divine endorsement of armed struggle. As noted by Zoubir & Dris-Aït-Hamadouche (2013), jihadist propaganda began to frame the uprisings as evidence of the weakness of state systems and as an opportunity to establish alternative Islamic governance across the Sahel.

The Arab Spring acted as a regional shockwave, weakening border controls, amplifying governance challenges, and accelerating the militarization of non-state actors in the Sahel. This transformation, coupled with pre-existing socio-political grievances, has entrenched terrorism as a persistent threat and significantly complicated counter-terrorism responses by ECOWAS.

1.2 Contemporary manifestations of violent extremism: Terrorism in the Sahel today

Terrorism in the Sahel has rapidly evolved into one of the most urgent and devastating security challenges in West Africa today. The Sahelian region of West Africa has become a focal point of global concern due to the sharp escalation of violent extremist activities. According to the Global Terrorism Index (2023), the Sahel now accounts for more than 40% of terrorism-related deaths globally, an alarming figure that surpasses historically volatile areas like the Middle East and South Asia. This sharp increase underscores Sahel's transformation from a peripheral conflict zone into a central node in the global jihadist network.

Contemporary scholarly literature identifies a convergence of structural and proximate factors that have contributed to the rise and entrenchment of terrorism in the Sahel. Thurston (2020) attributes the expansion of extremist groups in part to state fragility and chronic underinvestment in governance, especially in marginalized peripheral zones. These areas, often lacking in public infrastructure, health services, and educational access, have generated a pervasive sense of abandonment and alienation among local populations. This

void has been readily exploited by jihadist organizations such as Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM), the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), and Ansarul Islam. These groups have successfully embedded themselves into communities by offering parallel structures of justice, security, and basic services, thereby increasing their legitimacy in the eyes of disillusioned populations.

Ethnic and communal tensions further complicate the terrorism landscape. The literature reveals that groups such as the Fulani, often targeted by both state and non-state actors, have emerged as both victims and perpetrators of violence. Benjaminsen and Ba (2019) document how marginalization, land disputes, and intercommunal animosities— exacerbated by climate stress and competition over natural resources have become fertile ground for extremist recruitment. The ethnicization of conflict in the Sahel, particularly in Burkina Faso and Mali, has allowed terrorist groups to deepen societal divisions and strengthen their hold on contested territories.

Regional instability is also intensified by the highly porous borders and the transnational nature of jihadist operations. Dowd and Raleigh (2013) argue that the mobility of fighters, arms, and radical ideologies across national frontiers significantly undermines the ability of individual states to respond effectively. Armed groups frequently operate across Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso with ease, taking advantage of weak border controls and limited state presence. This transboundary dynamic necessitates a more coordinated regional security architecture, yet multilateral initiatives such as the G5 Sahel Joint Force and ECOWAS's Counter-Terrorism Strategy have been plagued by fragmented leadership, logistical inadequacies, and inconsistent political will (Wing, 2021).

A critical dimension in the literature is the hybrid nature of contemporary jihadist ideology. Rather than relying solely on global Salafi-jihadist narratives, today's extremist groups in the Sahel effectively blend these with localized grievances. Nsaibia and Weiss (2022) highlight how jihadist propaganda and recruitment strategies now incorporate themes such as land injustice, police brutality, state corruption, and clan exclusion. This dual-layered

approach increases the resonance of Jihadist messaging and enhances the appeal of armed struggle to disenfranchised youth. Military responses that fail to address these contextual factors often provoke backlash, resulting in increased recruitment by extremist groups and growing mistrust toward state authorities.

The presence of foreign forces, particularly those from former colonial powers, has triggered political sensitivities and sometimes created anti-government and anti-foreign sentiments. The departure of Operation Barkhane and the drawdown of international forces in the region reflect broader dissatisfaction with external military interventions. At the same time, the shifting geopolitical landscape, marked by new actors such as the Wagner Group and increased Russian influence has raised additional questions about the coherence and long-term sustainability of counterterrorism alliances.

Terrorism in the Sahel today is not merely a security issue but a complex socio-political crisis rooted in governance deficits, historical marginalization, and regional instability. The reviewed literature underscores that a purely military approach is insufficient and, in some cases, counterproductive. Instead, scholars advocate for a comprehensive, people-centered strategy that integrates governance reform, justice sector accountability, development investments, and inclusive dialogue. Only by addressing the structural and ideological drivers of extremism can the region hope to curtail the spread of terrorism and achieve sustainable peace and security.

1.3 The evolution and content of the ECOWAS Counter-Terrorism Strategy

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has emerged as a key regional actor in the fight against terrorism in West Africa, particularly in response to the growing security crisis in the Sahel. Over the past decade, ECOWAS has sought to strengthen its collective security framework through multilateral strategies, institutional reforms, and regional coordination mechanisms aimed at combating violent extremism. As underscored by Aning and Bah (2009), ECOWAS's security architecture has progressively evolved from a conflict resolution body into a proactive counterterrorism actor, responding to threats across national borders.

A cornerstone of ECOWAS's strategy is the ECOWAS Counter-Terrorism Strategy and Implementation Plan, adopted in 2013, which outlines a three-pillar approach: preventive measures, law enforcement and military responses, and reconstruction and peacebuilding. Scholars such as Osaretin (2018) have emphasized the significance of this multidimensional strategy in recognizing terrorism as not only a military threat but also a symptom of deeper socio-political and economic grievances. The framework promotes regional intelligence sharing, harmonization of legal frameworks, and cross-border cooperation among member states, yet its implementation has been uneven due to institutional weaknesses and political divergences across the region.

Regional military initiatives have also played a vital role. ECOWAS has supported joint security operations such as the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) and contributed political backing to the G5 Sahel Joint Force, although it is not a direct implementer. According to Albrecht and Haenlein (2020), while these military frameworks represent important steps toward regional solidarity, they have suffered from inadequate funding, logistical constraints, and a reliance on external donors such as the European Union and France, raising questions about long-term sustainability and ownership.

ECOWAS's efforts to counter terrorism have included non-military components such as promoting deradicalization, youth empowerment, and early warning systems through the ECOWAS Early Warning and Response Network (ECOWARN). However, scholars like Obi (2021) argue that the political will to operationalize these non-coercive tools remains limited, and civil society involvement is often superficial. Non-military strategies are gaining traction as essential components of long-term counterterrorism efforts. ECOWAS's CTS emphasizes the "reconstruction" pillar, which promotes development, social cohesion, and education. Scholars such as Thurston (2020) and Idrissa (2022) argue that community resilience, religious dialogue, and youth empowerment are essential to preventing radicalization. Examples include civil society-led initiatives in Burkina Faso and community policing models in northern Nigeria. However, these approaches remain underfunded and are often not well-integrated into national counterterrorism frameworks.

While ECOWAS has made important strides in building a regional response to terrorism, its impact is constrained by a lack of coherence among member states, resource limitations, and the complex nature of violent extremism in the Sahel. A more integrated and accountable regional framework—one that balances military action with inclusive governances essential for sustained effectiveness in the fight against terrorism.

1.4 Challenges of implementation across member states

Despite the notable progress made by ECOWAS in conceptualizing a comprehensive regional counterterrorism framework, its operational effectiveness remains severely hampered by persistent implementation gaps and institutional limitations. The ECOWAS Counter-Terrorism Strategy (CTS) and Implementation Plan, adopted in 2013, was designed as a multidimensional instrument to combat the growing threat of violent extremism in West Africa. It encompasses prevention, enforcement, and post-conflict reconstruction as its three strategic pillars. Despite this ambitious and well-structured framework, the literature indicates that substantial discrepancies exist between policy design and implementation, driven by institutional weaknesses, diverging national interests, limited enforcement capacity, and fragmented coordination mechanisms.

A central issue highlighted by scholars such as Aning and Atta-Asamoah (2011) is the weak institutional capacity of ECOWAS to enforce its counterterrorism mandates. While the CTS outlines robust mechanisms for joint intelligence-sharing, legal harmonization, and military collaboration, ECOWAS lacks the autonomous structures necessary to operationalize these goals effectively. The organization relies heavily on member states for both funding and implementation, which often results in ad hoc, inconsistent responses to security crises. Unlike the African Union or the United Nations, ECOWAS does not possess a dedicated or permanent counterterrorism task force. Its principal military instrument, ECOWAS

Standby Force, remains underfunded, inadequately equipped, and rarely mobilized for counterterrorism operations (Albrecht and Haenlein, 2020).

Political alignment among member states presents another significant barrier to cohesive implementation. Lacher (2020) notes that divergent security priorities and threat perceptions among ECOWAS countries hinder the formation of a unified front. Sahelian states such as Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso face existential threats from jihadist groups and are highly invested in counterterrorism efforts. Conversely, coastal countries like Ghana, Côte d'Ivoire, and Togo prioritize issues such as maritime security, organized crime, and political stability. This asymmetry in perceived risk often results in unequal levels of commitment, resource allocation, and operational engagement within ECOWAS-led initiatives. Consequently, regional coordination becomes reactive and fragmented, rather than proactive and strategic. Furthermore, national sovereignty concerns and the preference for unilateral or bilateral security arrangements over regional ones undermine the collective ethos of ECOWAS.

Member states frequently pursue their own national counterterrorism agendas, sometimes in coordination with external factors such as France or the United States, at the expense of regional frameworks. This phenomenon leads to duplication of efforts, mistrust among neighbors, and inefficiencies in cross-border collaboration. The lack of real-time intelligence sharing and synchronized military planning further complicates efforts to contain transnational terrorist networks.

The legal dimension also reveals critical shortcomings. Although ECOWAS has advocated for the harmonization of anti-terror laws and the establishment of common judicial standards, progress has been uneven. Obi (2021) argues that while some member states have enacted anti-terror legislation, these laws often vary in definition, scope, and enforcement capacity. Such disparities hinder judicial cooperation, delay extradition processes, and create safe havens for suspects. The absence of standardized legal frameworks also undermines accountability and due process, raising concerns about human

rights violations, particularly in contexts where states use counterterrorism laws to suppress political dissent.

Moreover, the securitization of counterterrorism efforts has come at the expense of inclusive governance and community engagement. Civil society organizations (CSOs) remain largely excluded from formal security planning, despite their potential to contribute to early warning, prevention, and resilience-building. The marginalization of civil society weakens public trust in regional institutions and limits the effectiveness of community-based approaches to countering violent extremism. In addition, there is growing criticism that ECOWAS's emphasis on military solutions has sidelined developmental and psychosocial interventions, which are critical to addressing the root causes of radicalization.

Resource constraints continue to be a persistent issue. ECOWAS remains heavily dependent on external donors, especially the European Union and France, for the financing of its security initiatives. While such support has been instrumental in launching and sustaining some programs, it also introduces vulnerabilities related to donor priorities, conditionalities, and sustainability. The over-reliance on foreign assistance raises questions about regional ownership, long-term planning, and the capacity of ECOWAS to act independently of external influence.

The literature suggests that ECOWAS's counterterrorism strategy suffers from a mismatch between strategic ambition and operational capacity. Implementation gaps are rooted in structural challenges, including institutional fragmentation, lack of political cohesion, legal inconsistencies, and financial dependency. Overcoming these obstacles requires a multipronged approach that includes strengthening institutional infrastructure, fostering greater legal harmonization, enhancing intra-regional solidarity, and ensuring inclusive stakeholder engagement. Only through such reforms can ECOWAS move from aspirational frameworks to effective action in the face of rising terrorist threats across West Africa.

1.5 The role of international and multilateral partnerships

The regional security architecture of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has evolved significantly over the past two decades in response to persistent threats of terrorism and instability, particularly within the Sahel region. While ECOWAS has taken critical steps to establish an integrated peace and security framework, the literature consistently underscores that its effectiveness is substantially underpinned by international and multilateral support. Financial aid, technical assistance, political backing, and operational support from a range of global actors have played an essential role in enabling ECOWAS to function as a credible security actor. However, this reliance also raises pressing questions about sustainability, ownership, and strategic autonomy.

The European Union (EU) remains one of ECOWAS's most prominent strategic partners, particularly in financing and technical cooperation. Through initiatives such as the EU Support to ECOWAS Peace, Security and Stability (EU-ECOWAS PSS) program, the EU has provided funding for conflict early warning systems, capacity-building in mediation and peacekeeping, and institutional reforms within ECOWAS's security apparatus. These contributions have strengthened the ECOWAS Peace and Security Architecture (EPSA), enabling the regional body to coordinate with member states more effectively and develop standard operating procedures for crisis response. Kaldor and Rangelov (2014) argue that the EU's normative influence has been vital in encouraging ECOWAS to align its security frameworks with international standards on human rights, gender mainstreaming, and civilian protection.

Nonetheless, critics caution that the EU's support, while valuable, introduces an element of dependency that may inhibit ECOWAS's ability to independently define its priorities. Scholars such as Bach (2020) highlight that much of the EU's assistance is project-based, donor-driven, and sometimes misaligned with ECOWAS's locally defined strategic objectives. Moreover, the volatility of European domestic politics can affect the consistency and predictability of long-term support, leading to interruptions in program implementation and planning cycles.

In parallel, the United Nations (UN), particularly through the United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel (UNOWAS), plays a significant role in providing political and diplomatic support. UNOWAS has partnered with ECOWAS on electoral observation, preventive diplomacy, and mediation missions, most notably in The Gambia (2017), Guinea-Bissau (2019), and Mali (2020). This collaboration demonstrates the growing institutional convergence between regional and global organizations in addressing shared security threats. Obi (2020) suggests that the strategic relationship between ECOWAS and UNOWAS has enhanced regional legitimacy and served as a bridge between African initiatives and broader global peacebuilding norms.

Beyond the EU and UN, bilateral partnerships with states such as France, the United States, Germany, and the United Kingdom are central to ECOWAS's operational capacity. France's involvement in Operation Barkhane and the formation of the G5 Sahel Joint Force, although outside the direct control of ECOWAS, indirectly support ECOWAS's strategic environment. Similarly, the United States has contributed through the Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership (TSCTP), focusing on counterterrorism training, intelligence sharing, and logistical support to West African forces. These initiatives have expanded the region's tactical and technical competencies, allowing member states to participate in joint operations and improve interoperability.

However, a growing body of literature questions the efficacy and long-term impact of foreign military assistance. Charbonneau (2017) and Boeke (2022) argue that such interventions often prioritize tactical counterterrorism victories—such as the elimination of high-profile targets—over institutional reforms or local capacity development. Moreover, these efforts have sometimes fostered elite militarization, sidelined civil society actors and undermined democratic governance structures. The perception of foreign control or neocolonial motivations, particularly surrounding French involvement, has generated resistance within local populations, weakening the legitimacy of regional and national authorities.

In terms of continental coordination, the African Union (AU) has sought to harmonize its efforts with ECOWAS through the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA) and the

African Standby Force framework. However, operational overlaps and coordination gaps have persisted. While ECOWAS is recognized as a Regional Economic Community (REC) with delegated authority under the AU, limited funding and conflicting mandates have at times impeded seamless collaboration. Scholars such as Aning and Bah (2012) emphasize the importance of clarifying roles and ensuring that external partnerships reinforce rather than bypass regional ownership.

International and multilateral support has been both an enabler and a constraint in ECOWAS's security trajectory. While it has provided the financial and strategic logistical support for counterterrorism coordination in the Sahel, its long-term success will depend on whether these partnerships evolve to empower ECOWAS and its member states to define, fund, and implement their security strategies independently, which is not the case. The shift from donor-driven to partnership-driven models is imperative if ECOWAS is to emerge as a truly autonomous and credible regional security actor in the fight against terrorism.

1.6 The impact of the AES withdrawal and internal fragmentation

The withdrawal of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) in 2024 marks a significant rupture in regional political and security dynamics. This decision, led by military juntas in these Sahelian states, not only signifies a political realignment away from traditional multilateral frameworks but also raises questions regarding the future of the ECOWAS Counterterrorism Strategy (CTS) and the broader security architecture of West Africa. Given that these three states constitute the epicenter of jihadist activity in the region, their departure is likely to undermine the very foundations of ECOWAS's collective response to terrorism.

1. Strategic Importance of the Sahel States in the ECOWAS Counterterrorism Framework

Scholars have repeatedly noted that Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger are central to the ECOWAS Counterterrorism Strategy due to their geographic exposure, frequency of attacks, and active engagement in regional security initiatives (International Crisis Group, 2023; Aning & Bah, 2019). Together, these states have borne the brunt of terrorism-related

violence in the region. The CTS, established in 2013 and operationalized from 2015, rests on principles of regional burden-sharing, early warning systems, legal harmonization, and joint military response. These mechanisms, however, rely on full participation and political commitment from all member states.

The withdrawal of the Sahelian states effectively removes the frontline actors from ECOWAS's operational sphere. As Bøås (2024) argues, this undermines the geostrategic coherence of the regional security complex as defined by Buzan and Wæver (2003), where threats are considered interdependent across national boundaries. Without these states, ECOWAS loses critical territory for intelligence gathering, regional coordination, and force deployment.

2. Implications for Operational Mechanisms and Intelligence Architecture

The ECOWAS Early Warning and Response Network (ECOWARN) has played a key role in monitoring terrorism risks across West Africa. The Sahel states contributed significantly to this network, offering frontline data and participating in joint assessments. Their withdrawal now creates gaps in the intelligence value chain that may diminish the quality and comprehensiveness of regional threat assessments (ISS Africa, 2024).

Moreover, joint military responses, such as the ECOWAS Standby Force and its coordination with the G5 Sahel Joint Force are expected to be impacted. Although the ECOWAS Standby Force was not actively deployed during the past decade, its strategic intent was closely linked to Sahel security. Now, as coordination with G5 Sahel becomes diplomatically and operationally uncertain, overlapping mandates and strategic incoherence are likely to increase (Boeke & Schuurman, 2021).

This fragmentation further complicates regional engagement with international donors and security partners. Many Western states and institutions preferred working through ECOWAS as a coordinating platform. The tripartite exit might force external actors to negotiate fragmented bilateral arrangements or engage with new regional formations, such as the Alliance of Sahel States (AES), which lacks institutional maturity and legitimacy in the eyes of the international community.

3. Political Consequences and Institutional Legitimacy

The departure of these states also carries political symbolism that threatens ECOWAS's credibility as a regional actor. The organization's firm stance against unconstitutional changes in government, while normatively consistent, has arguably driven a wedge between it and military-led governments in the Sahel. As Okolo (2024) notes, this has led to accusations of selective enforcement, regional bias, and external manipulation, weakening ECOWAS's legitimacy.

 The political fracture has implications for norm diffusion and legal harmonization efforts that have been central to the CTS. ECOWAS's work in standardizing anti-terror legislation, promoting democratic oversight of security institutions, and aligning member states' criminal justice systems now faces rollback in these key territories. The withdrawal of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger could embolden other member states facing political crises to question or even exit the ECOWAS framework, further destabilizing regional cohesion.

A Shift in the Counterterrorism Geography: Coastal Prioritization and Security Recalibration

In response to this schism, some scholars and practitioners suggest that ECOWAS might recalibrate its counterterrorism strategy to focus on its coastal members, particularly in the Gulf of Guinea, where extremist violence has begun to spread. Countries such as Togo, Benin, and Côte d'Ivoire have witnessed increasing cross-border incursions from Sahel-based groups. This potential pivot, while strategically justifiable, risks abandoning the Sahel—the region most in need of multilateral security support (OECD, 2024).

Moreover, the departure challenges ECOWAS's ability to respond holistically to terrorism. A geographically fragmented approach undermines the regional logic of security interdependence and may result in the replication of national silos rather than fostering collective resilience.

Toward a New Regional Security Paradigm?

The breakaway of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger from ECOWAS constitutes a seismic shift in West Africa's security landscape. While it presents operational, political, and institutional challenges to the ECOWAS Counterterrorism Strategy, it also serves as a critical juncture for rethinking regional cooperation. Scholars are increasingly calling for a reimagining of regional security architectures—ones that prioritize inclusivity, local ownership, and flexible engagement modalities rather than relying on rigid legalism or donor-driven mandates (Yabi, 2023).

Whether ECOWAS can adapt to this new reality will determine its future role as a credible and effective security actor in the region. Failure to do so risks the fragmentation of counterterrorism efforts and the erosion of a regional order built over decades.

1.7 Identified gaps in literature

Despite a growing body of work on extremism and security in West Africa, several gaps remain:

- A lack of empirical assessment of the ECOWAS Counter-Terrorism Strategy's implementation across member states.
- Insufficient analysis of the institutional interplay between ECOWAS, member states, and international partners.
- Limited engagement with the political dynamics and legitimacy challenges facing ECOWAS.
- A need for forward-looking policy recommendations based on a decade of strategy execution.

This thesis seeks to bridge these gaps by evaluating the implementation and impact of the ECOWAS framework from 2015 to 2025, drawing insights from key stakeholders and institutional reports to offer evidence-based policy recommendations.

CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This chapter outlines the research methodology adopted for this study, which evaluates the implementation and effectiveness of the ECOWAS Counter-Terrorism Strategy (ECTS) in the Sahel from 2015 to 2025. The methodology aligns with the overarching goal of the research: to assess the degree to which ECOWAS's strategy has achieved its intended objectives and identify key institutional, political, and operational gaps. This chapter explains the research approach, design, sampling techniques, data collection and analysis methods, ethical considerations, and limitations. Each component was carefully selected to ensure analytical rigor, empirical validity, and consistency with the research questions and objectives.

1.0 Research Approach and Justification

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative methods to comprehensively assess the ECTS's implementation and outcomes. This approach is appropriate given the complex and multidimensional nature of counter-terrorism policy and regional security cooperation. Qualitative data provides in-depth insights into perceptions, implementation challenges, and strategic gaps, while quantitative data offers measurable trends in terrorism incidents and operational outcomes.

Creswell (2014) advocates for mixed methods in public policy research, as it enables triangulation, enhances reliability, and bridges the gap between institutional frameworks and ground-level realities. This dual approach is particularly suitable for this study, as it seeks to evaluate both the institutional strategy (what ECOWAS planned) and the operational reality (what was achieved).

1.1 Research Design

An explanatory case study design was employed, based on Yin's (2017) model. This design allows for a detailed, real-world analysis of the strategy's implementation across specific Sahelian countries—namely, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Nigeria, and Senegal. These countries were selected based on their geographic location within the West African Sahel area, exposure to extremist threats, and relevance to ECOWAS's regional security

interventions. The case study approach supports the exploration of how and why the ECTS performed as it did in different political and security contexts.

1.2 Population and Sampling Strategy

The target population included individuals with direct involvement in, or deep knowledge of, the ECOWAS security framework, particularly in relation to the Sahel. This includes:

- ECOWAS officials

- Government representatives from member states

- Academics and regional security experts

- African Union (AU) peace and security stakeholders

- Civil society actors and youth-led organizations

A total of 35 participants were selected using purposive sampling, which is appropriate for accessing elite and expert respondents. Snowball sampling was also employed to reach high-level actors through trusted institutional referrals. Patton (2015) supports this strategy for non-generalizable studies where the goal is to obtain rich, expert-driven data.

Demographically, the sample was inclusive across gender and national representation, with participants from Liberia, Nigeria, Ghana, Senegal, and Sierra Leone.

1.3 Data Collection Methods and Instruments

Data collection utilizes both primary and secondary instruments:

- Semi-structured interviews: Conducted virtually to allow open-ended, thematic exploration while maintaining focus across cases. Interviews captured stakeholder perspectives on policy alignment, implementation bottlenecks, regional coordination, and institutional resilience.

- Surveys: Disseminated digitally to complement interviews and capture broader trends and stakeholder sentiments.

- Document analysis: Institutional reports, policy briefs, and datasets from sources such as the Global Terrorism Index (GTI), ECOWARN, UNODC, and ACLED were reviewed to extract data on terrorism trends and policy interventions.

All instruments were pre-tested for clarity, consistency, and content validity prior to deployment.

1.4 Data Analysis Techniques

The data analysis process followed Creswell's (2014) convergent parallel design, in which qualitative and quantitative findings are collected and analyzed separately before being integrated:

❖ Qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis. Responses were coded to identify recurring patterns and categorized into themes such as implementation effectiveness, political will, funding, institutional coordination, and civil society engagement.
❖ Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, charts) to illustrate trends in terrorist incidents, ECOWAS intervention frequency, and budget allocations.

The combination of both forms of analysis provided a nuanced understanding of the research problem and allowed for triangulation of key findings in Chapter Four.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

The research adhered to strict ethical standards, consistent with Leavy (2017) and institutional research protocols:

1. Participants received informed consent forms explaining the purpose, voluntary nature, and confidentiality of the study.
2. Interviews were recorded only with participant consent and transcribed securely.
3. Sensitive data related to regional security and political actors were handled under the do-no-harm principle, particularly in relation to fragile or authoritarian contexts.

4. An academic research enrollment proof was presented to participants who requested formal proof of academic intent.

1.5 Limitations of the Methodology

Several challenges were encountered during fieldwork:

> Due to the 2024 withdrawal of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger from ECOWAS, access to ECOWAS officials currently stationed in these countries was not possible.

> Government officials and security actors were at times reluctant to participate without formal academic credentials or guarantees of confidentiality.

> There was a lack of disaggregated data specifically measuring the success or failure of the ECTS mechanisms.

These limitations were mitigated by relying on remote interviews, institutional contacts, triangulation through secondary sources, and a focus on accessible case data.

The methodology employed in this study ensures a rigorous, multi-perspective analysis of the ECOWAS Counter-Terrorism Strategy over a ten-year period. By combining qualitative

insights with empirical trend data and aligning the approach with theoretical frameworks such as Regional Security Complex Theory and Institutionalism, this chapter sets the foundation for a robust examination of the implementation and efficacy of ECOWAS's regional security response in the Sahel.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Deaths Global Terrorism Index attributes to terrorism

The number in the Sahel exceeded the rest of the world combined in 2024

Legend: ■ Sahel Region ■ Rest of sub-Saharan Africa ■ Rest of world

Source: Terrorism tracker / Institute for Economics & Peace calculations — **BBC**
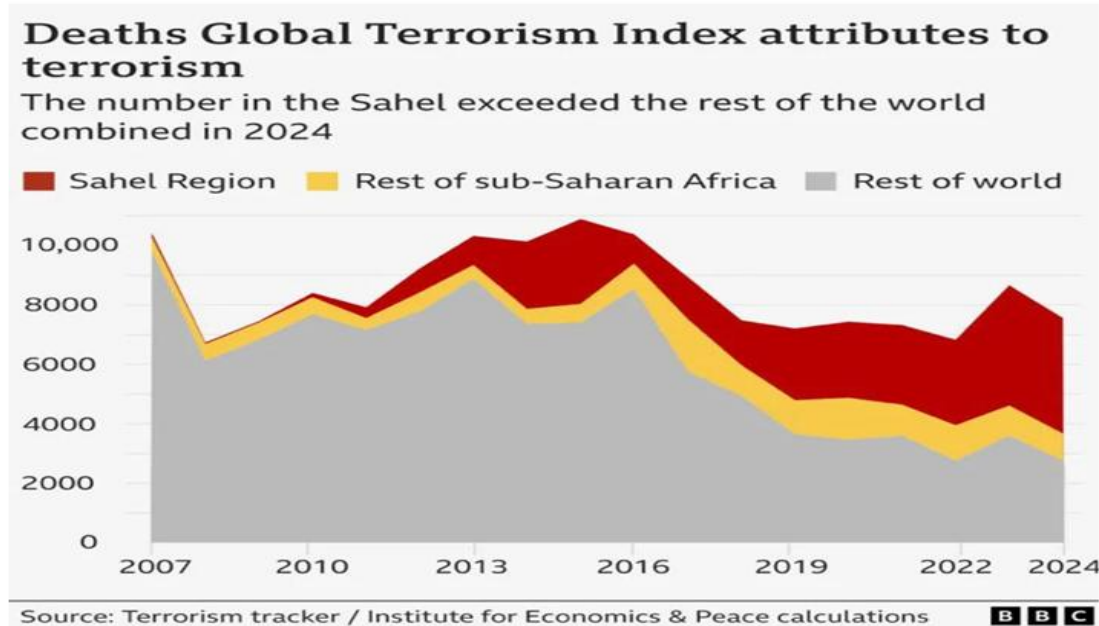
The Sahel stretches from the west coast of

Source: <u>Institute for Economics and Peace</u>

The Sahel region of Africa has increasingly become the epicenter of global terrorism, now accounting for the highest proportion of terrorism-related fatalities worldwide. According to the latest Global Terrorism Index (Institute for Economics and Peace [IEP], 2024), the region recorded 3,885 deaths resulting from terrorist attacks in a single year—representing 51.4 percent of the global total of 7,555 deaths. This marks the first time the Sahel has contributed to more than half of all terrorism-related fatalities globally, underscoring the escalating severity of the security crisis in this semi-arid zone south of the Sahara Desert.

Comparative Ranking and Trends

	2015				2025			
Country	Rank	Incident	Death	Score	Rank	Incident	Death	Score
Burkina Faso	52	3	4	2.31	1	111	1,532	8.58
Nigeria	19	138	2,003	5.80	6	99	565	7.66
Niger	19	25	202	5.93	5	101	930	7.78
Mali	16	85	181	6.20	4	201	604	7.91

[1]Source: Global Terrorism Index | Countries most impacted by terrorism

Burkina Faso: From Peripheral threat to Epicenter

Burkina Faso had the biggest jump in both rank and deaths, going from 52nd in the world in 2015 to 1st in 2024. In 2015, there were only 3 incidents and 4 deaths in the country. Now, there have been 111 incidents and more than 1,500 deaths, which is more than 38,000% more deaths. Its GTI score went from 2.31 to 8.58, signaling a complete erosion of internal security. This worsening shows that the CTS has not been able to stop extremism in states that were previously unexposed to high level of terrorist activities.

Nigeria: Persistent threat with Relative Decline

Boko Haram and ISWAP activities once made Nigeria the hub of terrorism in the Sahel, but over the course of the decade, the number of incidents (138 to 99) and deaths (2,003 to 565) went down. Its GTI score also went down a little, from 8.80 to 7.66. Nigeria is still in the

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[1] Since there were no terrorist attacks or terrorism-related fatalities in Senegal in 2015 or 2024, according to the Global Terrorism Index (GTI), the country was excluded from the analysis (Institute for Economics & Peace, 2024).

top ten globally, though, which means that even though things have gotten better, its broader counterterrorism efforts have not led to regional stability.

Niger: Silent Escalation

Niger's data shows that the number of incidents has gone up four times (from 25 to 101) and the number of deaths has gone up more than 360% (from 202 to 930). Its rise from 19th to 5th place and its GTI score going from 5.93 to 7.78 show how important it is becoming in the region's terror dynamics. The exponential rise, even with a lot of youth-oriented programming and ECOWARN use, shows that soft strategies alone don't work when hard security infrastructure is weak.

Mali: Deepening Insecurity

Mali, which was already one of the region top two hotspot in 2015, got worse. Its rank went from 16 to 4, and its GTI score went up to 7.91. The number of incidents went from 85 to 201, and the number of deaths went from 181 to 604. Military coups, unstable politics, and dependence on non-ECOWAS actors (especially Wagner Group forces) may have made it harder for countries to work together to fight terrorism, making it harder for them to work with ECOWAS systems.

 Trends and implications in the region

• Sahelian escalation: Now, all four states are in the top 10 in the world for the effects of terrorism, up from just one (Nigeria) in 2015. This shows that extremist violence is no longer limited to one state but is now spread throughout the Sahel.

• Explosive increase in fatalities: The total number of deaths in these four countries went from 2,390 in 2015 to 3,631 in 2024, with a big rise especially in Burkina Faso and Niger.

• Deterioration of GTI Scores: All countries (except Nigeria) saw big jumps in their GTI scores, which shows that terrorist attacks are becoming more deadly, more common, and having a bigger effect on society.

• Failure of the regional strategy: The data shows that terrorism is still happening, even with ECOWAS CTS. Instead, the last ten years have seen an increase in geographic reach, operational complexity, and civil-military division, especially in weak states.

The statistical comparison between 2015 and 2024 shows a clear picture: terrorism has gotten worse in the Sahel even though the ECOWAS Counter-Terrorism Strategy is in place. While Nigeria shows marginal improvement, Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger have experienced sharp deteriorations. It's especially alarming that Burkina Faso went from being a relatively stable country to the most terror-affected country in the world in just ten years.

These patterns show that there are serious problems with how the ECOWAS framework is being put into action, how resources are being used, how intelligence is being shared, and

how communities are being involved. They also question how well the strategy can adapt to changing threat environments and how political stability can help make security gains.

1.2 Respondent Feedback and Qualitative Analysis

Overview of Participants Demography

The study sampled 35 participants from five West African countries—Liberia, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Ghana, and Senegal. Participants were chosen from professional backgrounds that required expert knowledge on the ECTS thus ensuring a holistic and informed analysis:

- Government officials from ECOWAS member states (5)

- ECOWAS regional personnel (5)

- Academics and regional policy experts (5)

- African Union officials (5)

- Civil society and youth leaders (10)

- Others (Institutional/Think Tank respondents) (5)

Gender Representation:

• 57% were female (20 participants)

• 43% were male (15 participants)

[2]National Representation:

• Liberia (11), Nigeria (7), Sierra Leone (7), Ghana (6), Senegal (4)

This diversity ensured the inclusion of state, intergovernmental, and grassroots perspectives on the regional counter-terrorism efforts.

Strategic Efficacy Assessment

In response to the central research question—"Has ECOWAS been successful in the regional fight against terrorism in the Sahel over the last decade?"—all 35 respondents (100%) answered No, indicating unanimous skepticism about the strategy's success.

When disaggregated:

• 65.7% (23 participants) rated the ECTS as moderately successful

• 34.3% (12 participants) considered the framework ineffective or a failure

These figures reflect a consensus that while ECOWAS's efforts were well-intentioned and structurally sound, the results have not matched expectations, particularly in terms of operational impact and regional stability. 1.4 Thematic Qualitative Insights

Regional Coordination and Impact

Respondents from Nigeria and ECOWAS criticized the mismatch between resource investment and security outcomes, despite major budgetary efforts such as Nigeria's recent $14 million counter-terrorism commitment. A majority of respondents from Liberia, Ghana,

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[2] There is no response from any ECOWAS officials who are currently based in Burkina Faso, Mali, or Niger because of the AES formal withdrawal from ECOWAS.   Nonetheless, several official and specialist who took part in the interviews and survey had previously work in those nations with the ECOWAS counterterrorism Strategy.

and Sierra Leone believed that although flawed, the ECTS facilitated intelligence sharing, political dialogue, and military cooperation across borders.

Implementation and Enforcement Weaknesses

Multiple ECOWAS officials acknowledged that the strategy was never fully operationalized at the national level. A former official emphasized that national political priorities overrode regional coordination, especially in Sahelian states like Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. Their withdrawal in 2024 was described as a severe blow to regional cohesion, raising concerns over the long-term viability of the ECTS framework.

Inclusion of Civil Society and Youth

Participants from youth and civil society groups in Ghana, Liberia, and Sierra Leone unanimously agreed that inclusivity was weak, particularly for youth and grassroots actors. A Ghanaian youth leader lamented that, while youth engagement appears in policy design, it lacks practical implementation. Participants called for embedded youth panels, peace-tech innovation grants, and intergenerational dialogue structures within ECOWAS's security architecture.

Structural Challenges and Over-Reliance on Donors

A former ECOWAS official (now with the AU) and a UN official both stressed the lack of sustainable regional financing. Heavy dependence on UN and multilateral donors weakens regional ownership and opens avenues for external geopolitical influence. Without firm financial commitment from member states, implementation efforts risk remaining donor-driven and externally dictated.

Strategic Recommendations from Respondents

Policy experts from the Kofi Annan Institute and Think Tank institutions recommended the following:

- Shift from military-centric responses to governance and development-based strategies

- Timely and unified responses to crises to prevent delays that extremists exploit

- Community-driven models that embed local knowledge and resilience

- Establishment of a Youth Engagement Unit, innovation hubs, and structured grassroots outreach within ECOWAS

These findings support the need for regional ownership, greater inclusivity, and a multidimensional approach to regional security in the Sahel.

Challenges and Limitations Identified

- Political instability and state withdrawal from ECOWAS fragmented regional operations.

- Insufficient local implementation of ECTS directives.

- Inconsistent political will and funding across member states.

- Youth and civil society exclusion in security dialogue and preventive initiative

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

This chapter presents a detailed discussion of the research findings in relation to the main research questions, theoretical framework, and reviewed literature. It examines how the data gathered through expert interviews, policy analysis, and stakeholder surveys provide insight into the efficacy of the ECTS and its implementation in the Sahel region between 2015 and 2025. The discussion highlights recurring themes such as institutional effectiveness, intergovernmental coordination, community engagement, and external partnerships. Each subsection systematically addresses a key aspect of the strategy's implementation and challenges, building a cohesive argument that links theory to practice.

1.1   Strategic Vision vs. Operational Realities

"We face neither East nor West: we face forward"

Kwame Nkrumah

The ECOWAS Counter-Terrorism Strategy (CTS) adopted in 2013 and operationalized in 2015, was designed around the pillars of prevention, pursuit, and reconstruction, aiming to create a holistic framework for addressing terrorism in the region. However, the research findings reveal a consistent gap between strategic intent and operational execution. Respondents and statistical analysis review that while the strategy is theoretically sound and aligns with international standards, its implementation has been hampered by limited regional and national ownership, resource constraints, and political instability in several Sahelian states. A decade into its implementation, the empirical evidence suggests a mixed level of success, characterized by institutional ambition, uneven national execution, and persistent security deterioration in core Sahelian states, namely Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Nigeria, and Senegal.

1. Prevention Pillar: Early Warning, Legal Harmonization, and Community Engagement

The prevention pillar aimed to tackle the root causes of extremism through proactive intelligence sharing, legal reforms, and community resilience. ECOWAS invested significantly in upgrading the ECOWAS Early Warning and Response Network

(ECOWARN) and promoted the adoption of harmonized anti-terror legislation across member states. While countries like Senegal and Nigeria demonstrated moderate progress in aligning national laws and integrating ECOWARN alerts into decision-making, others such as Mali and Burkina Faso struggled to institutionalize early warning due to fragile governance structures and a lack of national coordination mechanisms.

Interviews with civil society actors revealed that community-level engagement remained superficial, with limited inclusion of local stakeholders in national counter-radicalization programming. The failure to bridge the gap between regional prevention frameworks and local realities has hindered the strategy's effectiveness in curbing extremist narratives.

2. Enforcement Pillar: Joint Operations and Security Sector Reforms

The enforcement component focused on enhancing security cooperation, intelligence sharing, and the conduct of joint military operations. Countries such as Nigeria, Niger, and Chad played key roles in joint platforms like the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) and supported ECOWAS-led strategic planning for cross-border operations. However, the ECOWAS Standby Force was never deployed, and interviews with regional military officials revealed ongoing challenges in interoperability, resource pooling, and political commitment.

Burkina Faso and Mali, despite being the most affected, remained heavily reliant on bilateral military support (previously from France and now Russia) and underutilized ECOWAS-led security mechanisms. Moreover, different national priorities and mistrust among member states weakened intelligence coordination, particularly between the G5 Sahel and ECOWAS structures. Overall, the enforcement pillar reflected partial implementation with strong symbolic intent but limited operational integration.

3. Reconstruction Pillar: Deradicalization and Post-Conflict Recovery

The reconstruction pillar meant to support deradicalization, education, reintegration of ex-combatants, and governance reforms emerged as the least implemented from findings in this research. Respondents consistently noted that insufficient funding, political will, and donor preference for militarized solutions sidelined post-conflict recovery efforts. Niger

made some gains in youth reintegration and dialogue programming, supported by international partners, but such efforts were not directly anchored in ECOWAS's strategy.

The lack of integration between ECOWAS-level directives and national counter-terrorism policies was cited as a key issue. In Mali and Burkina Faso, successive political transitions disrupted continuity in counter-terrorism efforts, weakening the institutional memory needed to sustain long-term implementation. This finding aligns with the literature highlighting that regional cooperation in West Africa often struggles with state-level compliance. (Francis, 2009; Zenn, 2021).

See Appendix Table A1 for a tabular comparative analysis across the Sahel States

1.2 Institutional Coordination and Capacity Gaps

"You cannot carry out fundamental change without a certain amount of madness. In this case, it comes from nonconformity, the courage to turn your back on the old formulas, the courage to invent the future"

Thomas Sankara

Another recurring theme from qualitative data (interviews and survey) and Quantitative data was the lack of institutional coordination and technical capacity. Respondents from security agencies and regional bodies emphasized the limited role of ECOWARN and national focal points in providing real-time intelligence sharing and early warning. While ECOWAS has established joint task forces and frameworks for regional security collaboration, the data suggests these are underutilized due to competing national interests, insufficient funding, and trust deficits among member states.

Quantitative data derived from the Global Terrorism Index (GTI) indicates that terrorism-related fatalities in the Sahel surged from approximately 4,000 in 2015 to over 12,000 in 2023 and 2024, with Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger accounting for most deaths. The frequency and geographic spread of attacks expanded significantly, with incidents reported in areas previously considered low risk, such as northern Togo and Benin. The data also reflects a marked increase in attacks on civilian targets, including schools, places of

worship, and aid convoys, signaling a shift in extremist tactics toward societal disruption and mass intimidation.

In terms of regional coordination, ECOWARN has improved data collection and conflict trend reporting, but its effectiveness is constrained by the limited responsiveness of member states to early warning signals. While the system generates timely alerts, several national authorities lack the institutional mechanisms or political will to translate these alerts into preventive actions. The Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) has been more active in operational terms, especially in the Lake Chad Basin. However, its impact has been geographically limited and highly dependent on Nigerian leadership and bilateral funding.

Resource constraints were consistently flagged. The ECTS remains underfunded, and national contributions are irregular. This has forced reliance on external donors, particularly the EU and France, whose strategic priorities has not always aligned with regional objectives. Legal and operational incoherence across member states hampers judicial cooperation, border management, and intelligence sharing and the limited civil society involvement has weakened community trust in ECOWAS interventions further exacerbating implementation at Grassroots level.

The alignment between ECOWAS and the G5 Sahel Joint Force remains problematic. Interviews with regional policymakers and military officers revealed that operational mandates often overlap without effective coordination, leading to resource duplication and jurisdictional ambiguity. ECOWAS has played a largely supportive, rather than directive, role in G5 operations, which are themselves funded and politically influenced by external actors such as France and the European Union.

While ECOWAS CTS has succeeded in laying a foundational framework for regional cooperation, its implementation has been hampered by political, institutional, financial, and strategic challenges. The findings suggest that without addressing these core deficiencies, the long-term efficacy of ECOWAS's counterterrorism efforts in the Sahel will remain constrained.

Key Implementation Gaps and Institutional Challenges

- Political will and state-level divergence

- Funding and donor dependency

- Legal and policy incoherence across member states

- Lack of integration between military and non-military responses

This confirms prior studies that regional security architectures in Africa are often overstretched and overly reliant on external support (Aning & Abdallah, 2013). The ECOWAS Standby Force, while promising in concept, remains largely dormant in addressing terrorist threats in the Sahel. Interviewees cited challenges in logistics, interoperability, and bureaucratic bottlenecks as limiting factors to rapid deployment and joint operations.

1.3   Multilateral and External Influences

"African Solutions must be found for African problems. The Struggle against poverty and dependence will be won only by Africans standing on their own feet"

Julius Nyerere

A significant finding from the study was the dominant role played by external partners—notably France, the European Union, the United Nations, and bilateral actors such as the

U.S. in shaping counterterrorism in the Sahel. Most respondents acknowledged that ECOWAS's efforts have been substantially supported by foreign funding, capacity-building programs, and multilateral coordination mechanisms (e.g., the G5 Sahel, the AU Peace and Security Council).

The findings of this research affirm that international and multilateral partnerships have played an indispensable role in enabling ECOWAS to implement its counterterrorism initiatives, particularly within the context of the Sahel. As outlined in the literature review, ECOWAS's capacity to address the growing threat of terrorism is significantly bolstered by its relationships with key actors such as the European Union (EU), the United Nations

(UN), bilateral partners like France and the United States, and continental bodies such as the African Union (AU). However, this reliance on external actors has produced a mixed set of outcomes, simultaneously empowereing regional efforts and creating strategic and operational dependencies that have, at times, hampered implementation.

The EU's support, particularly through the EU-ECOWAS Peace, Security and Stability program, has been critical in enhancing ECOWAS's institutional and technical capabilities. EU funding has enabled the development of ECOWAS's early warning systems, promoted border security measures, and supported training and capacity-building exercises for peacekeeping forces. This assistance has also encouraged ECOWAS to integrate norms related to human rights, gender equality, and democratic governance into its security architecture. Yet, the research reveals a growing concern over donor-driven programming, which often reflects EU political priorities more than locally defined needs. As several ECOWAS officials interviewed during this research observed, externally funded programs may come with pre-determined frameworks that constrain regional ownership, leading to fragmented implementation and reduced flexibility.

The United Nations, particularly through UNOWAS, has added considerable value by fostering political dialogue and preventive diplomacy. The Gambia crisis in 2017 and the Mali transition process in 2020 exemplify successful joint ECOWAS-UN efforts in conflict mitigation. These collaborations reinforce ECOWAS's legitimacy and diplomatic clout. However, findings indicate that UN-ECOWAS coordination is occasionally undermined by bureaucratic inertia, with overlapping mandates and delays in response. Bilateral actors such as France and the United States have been instrumental in building operational capacity through counterterrorism training, intelligence sharing, and logistical support. Programs like the Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership (TSCTP) have allowed West African states to modernize their security forces and coordinate more effectively. However, findings from policy documents and secondary sources suggest that this form of support often prioritizes tactical military objectives over structural reforms. The emphasis on kinetic operations for strategic political gains, in many instances, militarized counterterrorism responses while sidelining critical development and governance

interventions. The French-led Operation Barkhane, for example, achieved limited success in terms of sustainable security and was met with widespread public resistance in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso thus resulting in diminished local trust and calls for troop withdrawals.

Another emerging issue is the geopolitical influence that donor states wield over ECOWAS policy direction. Interviews with regional analysts reveal that some international partners have pressured ECOWAS to adopt security frameworks that align with broader Western interests, such as migration control and border fortification, rather than addressing root causes of extremism. These interventions, while often well-resourced, may be perceived as neocolonial or externally imposed, weakening both domestic legitimacy and regional solidarity. The fallout from France's diminished influence in the Sahel and the rise of anti-Western sentiment further underscores how foreign political agendas can clash with local aspirations.

From an institutionalist lens, the findings demonstrate that ECOWAS's limited financial autonomy undermines its negotiating power with donors and restricts its ability to lead on strategy design and implementation. While ECOWAS has developed commendable frameworks such as the Counter-Terrorism Strategy (CTS), its dependence on external funding has constrained follow-through. The AU, although offering political endorsement through the APSA, has similarly struggled to align its initiatives with ECOWAS due to financial and bureaucratic constraints, resulting in duplicated efforts and institutional fatigue.

This discussion reinforces the idea that international and multilateral partnerships are a double-edged sword. They have significantly enhanced ECOWAS's ability to confront terrorism in the Sahel but have also introduced operational dependencies, legitimacy challenges, and strategic incoherence. However, this heavy dependence raises questions about the sustainability and autonomy of ECOWAS-led initiatives. Respondents highlighted that donor-driven agendas often overshadow locally driven priorities, making ECOWAS a secondary actor in the region it seeks to lead. This reflects broader concerns

about the "externalization of security" in Africa and the risk of fragmentation across regional bodies (Cold-Ravnkilde & Albrecht, 2021).

1.4 Inclusivity and Community Engagement in ECOWAS Counter-Terrorism Strategy

"A nation should not be judged by how it treats its highest citizens, but its lowest ones"

Nelson Mandela

This section discusses the role of inclusivity and community engagement within the ECOWAS Counter-Terrorism Strategy (CTS) from 2015 to 2025, with a focus on how these elements have been operationalized or neglected across Sahelian states. The ECTS explicitly calls for non-military, community-based approaches to combat terrorism, recognizing the role of local actors, youth, and civil society in preventing radicalization. However, survey responses and interviews conducted as part of this research reveal a notable gap between policy intent and implementation reality.

Feedback from civil society actors and local stakeholders indicates that community ownership of counterterrorism programs remains weak, particularly in remote and underserved Sahelian regions. Persistent mistrust in state institutions and national security forces has significantly hindered efforts to foster collaboration at the grassroots level. Many respondents pointed to the limited integration of traditional leaders, local governance structures, and grassroots organizations in the design and execution of prevention frameworks. This lack of engagement reinforces the perception that ECOWAS's approach has remained overly securitized, prioritizing military coordination and enforcement mechanisms while underinvesting in the "reconstruction" and resilience-building pillars of the strategy.

Yet, not all efforts have fallen short. In Niger and parts of northern Nigeria, small-scale programs have shown promise in integrating religious leaders, women's groups, and youth networks into early warning systems and deradicalization efforts. These cases highlight the potential of bottom-up approaches when community trust is prioritized and when local actors are treated as partners rather than passive recipients. The inclusion of imams, youth mentors, and women-led peace networks in designing localized response frameworks has

not only increased the legitimacy of interventions but also improved early detection of radicalization pathways.

Despite these examples, such initiatives remain isolated and inadequately scaled across the broader ECOWAS region. The findings suggest that for the ECTS to be more effective, it must institutionalize inclusive practices and strengthen community ownership as a core component of its strategic framework. This includes building long-term trust, decentralizing decision-making to local authorities, and ensuring sustained investment in the reconstruction pillar - especially in post-conflict zones where social fabric has been deeply eroded.

In summary, while ECOWAS has made commendable commitments on paper, the translation of inclusivity and community engagement into meaningful practice remains a

work in progress. Harnessing the potential of local actors and non-military stakeholders will be critical in achieving a sustainable and context-sensitive counterterrorism strategy for the Sahel.

1.5 Political Instability and Regime Transitions – The Consequences of the Withdrawal of the Sahel States

"Unity will not make us rich, but it can make it difficult for Africa and the African peoples to be disregarded and humiliated. And it is essential for the development of Africa."

Julius Nyerere

The withdrawal of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger from ECOWAS in 2024 marks a decisive turning point for the regional security architecture in West Africa. As frontline states in the fight against terrorism, their departure undermines the operational, institutional, and normative foundations of the ECOWAS Counterterrorism Strategy (CTS). This discussion interprets these developments in relation to the empirical findings of the study, emphasizing how this geopolitical rupture has impacted strategic coherence, intelligence coordination, regional legitimacy, and institutional performance.

Undermining Strategic and Geographic Coherence

The findings reinforce the centrality of the Sahel states to the ECOWAS counterterrorism agenda. Their strategic location within the epicenter of the Jihadist insurgency meant that their inclusion in the CTS was not only operationally vital but symbolically significant for regional solidarity. With their exit, ECOWAS loses direct access to critical zones of insurgency, diminishing the utility of regional early warning systems like ECOWARN and challenging the deployment logic of the ECOWAS Standby Force. This aligns with the Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), which suggests that a region's security interdependence is geographically embedded. The fragmentation introduced by the withdrawal disrupts this embeddedness, dislocating the regional security complex and weakening the collective capacity to respond to transnational threats.

Furthermore, the findings show that the absence of these states constrains regional operations by reducing the flow of intelligence and limiting border surveillance, particularly along routes heavily exploited by terrorist networks. This leaves remaining ECOWAS members, particularly in the Gulf of Guinea, more vulnerable to the southward spillover of Sahelian insurgencies.

Erosion of Intelligence Architecture and Operational Collaboration

Empirical evidence from interviews and document analysis confirms that the Sahel states were primary contributors to ECOWAS's regional intelligence-sharing networks. Their withdrawal creates significant data gaps and disrupts the continuity of joint assessments. This weakens the collective situational awareness necessary for preemptive counterterrorism action. Moreover, coordination with the G5 Sahel Joint Force and other multinational coalitions has become politically strained, as these former ECOWAS members now orient themselves toward alternative alliances like the Alliance of Sahel States (AES).

This operational disintegration threatens to duplicate mandates, dilute donor coordination, and reduce the overall effectiveness of external support mechanisms. The findings suggest that ECOWAS must either rebuild trust with the breakaway states or establish new

intelligence frameworks with coastal countries and the African Union to mitigate the resulting vacuum.

Political Legitimacy and Normative Crisis within ECOWAS

One of the most salient findings is the impact of the withdrawals on ECOWAS's normative authority. While ECOWAS's stance on unconstitutional changes of government adheres to democratic principles, it has also generated resentment among member states governed by military regimes. This has exposed tensions between the organization's normative aspirations and its political pragmatism.

The ECTS emphasized democratic accountability and legal harmonization as pillars of sustainable security. However, the current political fragmentation has derailed these initiatives. Key findings indicate a rollback in legal convergence, with the departing states disengaging from shared criminal justice frameworks and anti-terror laws. This threatens to erode ECOWAS's credibility and may embolden other politically unstable states to challenge or exit the bloc, further fracturing regional cohesion.

Strategic Recalibration and the Coastal Security Pivot

Considering these challenges, ECOWAS appears to be recalibrating its security focus toward coastal states such as Togo, Benin, Ghana, and Côte d'Ivoire—which have become increasingly exposed to Sahelian spillover. The findings suggest this shift is driven by both necessity and opportunity, as these countries remain politically aligned with ECOWAS and possess growing security infrastructure. However, this pivot risks creating an unbalanced regional security strategy that neglects the epicenter of the threat in the Sahel.

If ECOWAS limits its intervention to coastal zones, it undermines the foundational premise of the ECTS: that terrorism is a regional, not national, threat. A geographically fragmented approach risks replicating the same weaknesses that undermined bilateral responses before the adoption of the ECTS in 2015. Without re-engagement or strategic bridging

mechanisms with the Sahel states, ECOWAS's counterterrorism strategy risks becoming reactive, peripheral, and ultimately ineffective.

<u>A Moment for Strategic Reimagination</u>

The findings support scholarly calls for a reimagined regional security framework that is more flexible, inclusive, and locally grounded. This involves shifting from legal formalism to pragmatic diplomacy and from top-down interventions to participatory governance approaches that empower local communities and civil society actors in security governance.

Institutionalism theory, as applied in this study, highlights the need for ECOWAS to strengthen its internal capacities—particularly in enforcement, funding, and legitimacy. The current crisis presents an opportunity for reform: building resilient structures that are less vulnerable to political divergence, more responsive to community needs, and capable of operating in both formal and informal security environments.

In cases where ECOWAS imposed sanctions, counter-terrorism coordination was deprioritized or stalled. Respondents argued that the regional body needs to develop more flexible engagement frameworks that balance normative commitments with the practical demands of regional security collaboration.

This tension between normative regionalism and strategic pragmatism remains a central challenge, particularly as threats evolve in complexity and cross-border insurgencies persist.

1.6 Lessons Learned from 2015–2025

"No one is perfect in this imperfect world"

Patrice Lumumba

The decade-long implementation of the ECOWAS Counter-Terrorism Strategy (CTS) from 2015 to 2025 has yielded a mix of achievements, shortcomings, and pivotal insights. The findings allow us to distill key lessons across operational, institutional, and political dimensions.

What Worked

The most notable gains were achieved in the areas of intelligence sharing and early warning systems. The ECOWARN platform successfully expanded its coverage and analytical capabilities, enabling regional actors to monitor terrorist trends and forecast conflict dynamics with increasing accuracy. Several member states, particularly Nigeria, Senegal, and Niger, leveraged ECOWARN-generated data to inform national security planning.

Additionally, multilateral dialogues and normative frameworks established under ECOWAS provided a common language and strategic outlook among member states, fostering regional awareness and occasional collaboration. The enhancement of legal harmonization efforts, especially the development of model laws on counterterrorism, marks another step toward integration.

What Failed

Despite these gains, several critical components of the ECTS fell short. Chief among these was the inconsistent commitment of member states, which severely undermines strategy coherence. Countries less directly affected by terrorism, such as Guinea or Côte d'Ivoire—tended to deprioritize implementation, creating an uneven landscape of engagement and diluting collective regional efforts.

The lack of enforceable mechanisms within ECOWAS structures also limited accountability and responsiveness. The ECOWAS Standby Force, envisioned as a rapid deployment tool, remained inactive throughout the decade. Furthermore, coordination failures between ECOWAS and other regional security bodies, such as the G5 Sahel and the African Union Peace and Security Council, led to duplicated efforts and strategic misalignment.

Another shortfall was the underinvestment in reconstruction and community resilience programs. These components, though central to the ECTS, were often sidelined due to limited funding and donor-driven emphasis on kinetic responses. This imbalance exacerbated local grievances and left root causes of extremism insufficiently addressed.

Role of External Shocks

The period under review was marked by significant external shocks that profoundly influenced ECOWAS's performance. Political instability, particularly military coups in Mali (2020, 2021), Burkina Faso (2022), and Niger (2023), destabilized national security frameworks and interrupted regional coordination. These events also weakened ECOWAS's leverage and legitimacy, especially when punitive sanctions failed to achieve desired political reversals.

On the global stage, shifts in international counterterrorism priorities—including the U.S. pivot to strategic competition and France's partial military withdrawal from the Sahel—created funding gaps and strategic uncertainty. ECOWAS, heavily dependent on external technical and financial support, struggled to adapt to these transitions, further revealing the vulnerabilities in its funding model and strategic autonomy.

In sum, the 2015–2025 period offers a complex portrait of regional counterterrorism engagement: one marked by incremental institutional growth but persistent operational and political fragmentation. The lessons underscore the imperative for ECOWAS to strengthen internal coherence, diversify funding sources, and develop adaptive capacities that respond effectively to both internal challenges and external disruptions.

- What worked: intelligence sharing and early warning systems

- What failed: inconsistent member state commitment and enforcement mechanisms

- Role of external shocks: coups and global counterterrorism shifts

1.7   Contributions to Policy and Practice

"I am convinced that the time is always right to do what is right"

Ellen Johnson Sirleaf

The findings of this study have significant implications for the evolution of ECOWAS's security strategy and its role as a regional actor in counterterrorism. The past decade of engagement offers both cautionary lessons and strategic insights for recalibrating the regional approach.

Implications for ECOWAS's Future Security Strategy

To remain relevant and effective in a rapidly evolving security environment, ECOWAS must transition from a largely symbolic regional actor to a more operationally responsive and autonomous entity. This necessitates a shift from fragmented, donor-driven interventions to a sustainable and self-determined regional security model. ECOWAS should prioritize developing deployable capabilities, strengthening the Peace Fund, and institutionalizing mechanisms for preventive diplomacy and post-conflict stabilization. Furthermore, balancing military responses with governance and community engagement must become a core component of its strategic outlook.

Recommendations for Harmonizing National and Regional Efforts

The study reveals that inconsistent national commitments and divergent political interests have severely undermined the collective impact of the ECOWAS Counter-Terrorism Strategy. To address this, ECOWAS should:

a. Establish mandatory reporting and peer-review mechanisms that hold member states accountable to regional security commitments

b. Strengthen the legal harmonization process by providing technical and financial support for the domestication of regional counterterrorism instruments.

c. Promote interoperability among national forces, particularly through joint training, intelligence-sharing protocols, and standardized procedures for cross-border operations.

d. Create a coordination platform between ECOWAS, the G5 Sahel, and the African Union to reduce duplication and foster strategic coherence.

e. Enhancing Local Ownership, Accountability, and Legitimacy

A recurring theme in the findings is the limited inclusion of local actors in the design and implementation of counterterrorism initiatives. Enhancing the legitimacy of ECOWAS's efforts requires embedding local ownership into the policy framework. This can be achieved by:

a. Integrating civil society organizations, traditional leaders, and local governments into regional decision-making processes.

b. Supporting localized peacebuilding and resilience programs that address the socio-economic drivers of extremism.

c. Promoting transparent monitoring and evaluation systems that incorporate feedback from affected communities.

d. Ensuring that gender-sensitive approaches are mainstreamed, particularly in conflict prevention and post-conflict recovery efforts.

In essence, the path forward for ECOWAS lies in building a more inclusive, accountable, and strategically integrated security apparatus. By aligning regional objectives with national capacities and local realities, ECOWAS can emerge not only as a normative force but also as a capable and credible guardian of regional peace and security.

1.8 Synthesis and Link to Research Objectives

This section interprets the findings in light of the theoretical frameworks guiding the study - Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) and Institutionalism. These theories offer valuable lenses through which to assess the dynamics of ECOWAS's counterterrorism efforts in the Sahel from 2015 to 2025. RSCT helps explain the structural necessity of regional cooperation in the Sahel's interconnected security environment, while Institutionalism reveals the operational and normative constraints facing ECOWAS as a regional body. The divergence between conceptual regionalism and practical implementation points to the need for reforms that strengthen institutional capacity, improve coherence among member states, and enhance the linkage between regional policies and local realities.

Application of Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT)

RSCT posits that regions such as the Sahel are interconnected through shared security challenges that transcend national borders, necessitating regional solutions (Buzan & Wæver, 2003). The rise of transnational terrorist networks (AQIM, JNIM, and ISGS) highlights the Sahel as a regional security complex. The findings confirm that no single

state within the ECOWAS framework can effectively address terrorism in isolation, given the cross-border mobility of armed groups, the shared socio-political grievances, and the porous frontiers that characterize the region.

The ECOWAS Counter-Terrorism Strategy (CTS), as a collective regional response, reflects an RSCT-informed rationale. However, while the strategy acknowledges the interdependence of security threats, its implementation revealed significant asymmetries among member states. Countries with higher exposure to terrorism (e.g., Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso) exhibited more robust engagement, whereas more stable coastal states showed limited commitment. This divergence challenges RSCT's assumption of collective responsiveness and exposes the limits of regional cohesion in practice.

Moreover, the findings show that regional coordination mechanisms, such as ECOWARN and the ECOWAS Standby Force exist largely in form but not in full operational function. The ineffective translation of early warnings into coordinated action and the symbolic nature of military exercises reflect a partial realization of RSCT principles. Thus, while RSCT helps explain the necessity of regionalism, the fragmented implementation underscores the challenges of operationalizing collective security in a heterogeneous political environment.

Role of Institutionalism in Explaining ECOWAS's Performance

Institutionalism highlights the role of regional organizations in fostering norms, coordinating policy, and promoting compliance among member states. ECOWAS, as an institutional actor, has made significant normative strides by developing legal instruments, strategic frameworks, and facilitating regional dialogues. The Counter-Terrorism Strategy represents a notable institutional achievement in articulating a shared vision for addressing extremism.

However, the findings illustrate critical institutional weaknesses that limit ECOWAS's performance. These include lack of enforcement authority, inconsistent policy harmonization, and financial dependency on external donors. From an institutionalist perspective, the reliance on external funding from actors like the EU and France

undermines ECOWAS's autonomy and constrains its ability to independently shape regional security outcomes.

The study found that civil society engagement and local-level institutional integration are underdeveloped, weakening the legitimacy and responsiveness of ECOWAS's interventions. The failure to link top-down strategies with grassroots realities runs counter to institutionalist ideals of inclusive governance and stakeholder participation.

Nevertheless, ECOWAS's ability to convene member states, promote dialogue, and push for regional norms remains an important institutional function. The use of diplomatic pressure following military coups and support for national-level reforms are examples of its normative influence. Institutionalism, therefore, provides a partial but useful explanation for ECOWAS's performance in setting strong in agenda and norm-building, but weak in execution and accountability.

In summary, this chapter has explored the practical dimensions of ECOWAS's counterterrorism efforts in the Sahel from 2015 to 2025, drawing on primary data and scholarly analysis. It has revealed strengths in regional commitment and strategy formation, but also exposed enduring weaknesses in implementation, coordination, and inclusivity. These insights set the stage for the next chapter, which will present conclusions and concrete policy recommendations aimed at enhancing the effectiveness of ECOWAS's future counterterrorism architecture.

Conclusion

This thesis set out to critically evaluate how well the ECOWAS Counter-Terrorism Strategy (CTS) and its Implementation Framework worked over a ten-year period (2015–2025), with a focus on the Sahel region. The study used a qualitative, comparative, and policy-oriented approach based on the history of terrorism in West Africa and ECOWAS's changing role in keeping the region safe. The research asked whether ECOWAS's counterterrorism structure has been able to keep up with the region's growing security problems. It did this by looking at desk research, institutional data, interviews, and surveys in five Sahelian countries: Senegal, Nigeria, Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso.

The study was framed on the Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), which argues that security threats in interlinked regions like West Africa must be addressed collectively, accounting for interdependence among member states. This theory helped the study look at CTS's three main strategic pillars: prevention, enforcement, and reconstruction. It also focused on local ownership, institutional capacity, and international partnerships.

Key Findings

The findings of the study highlight both achievements and significant shortcomings in the operationalization of ECOWAS CTS. The following summarizes the key insights:

1. Legal and Strategic Alignment: A few member states, especially Senegal and Nigeria, have made their national security frameworks fit with the ECOWAS CTS. The creation of national coordination mechanisms and the harmonization of laws show that the regional framework has been partially adopted. But differences in capacity, political will, and governance structures have made the implementation uneven across the region.

2. Overemphasis on Enforcement: One of the main criticisms that come out of the study is that the "enforcement" pillar gets too much attention. Most of ECOWAS's work has been focused on working together in military operations, sharing intelligence, and keeping the borders safe. These efforts are important, but they often take the focus away from the "prevention" and "reconstruction" components that are necessary for long-term peacebuilding and resilience. Mali and Burkina Faso, which are always unstable, still

depend a lot on outside security forces (Previously the French and UN missions but has now move over to Russia), instead of ECOWAS-led peacebuilding efforts.

3. Weak institutional coordination: ECOWAS has set up different bodies and rules to help the region respond, such as the ECOWARN early warning system and the Inter-Governmental Action Group against Money Laundering in West Africa (GIABA). Yet, institutional coordination between ECOWAS and national governments remains weak. In many cases, operations are less coherent and effective because of overlapping mandates and broken communication lines.

4. Community engagement and inclusivity: The integration of counterterrorism strategies at the community level and the ownership of these strategies by local people are still not fully developed. CTS supports approaches that are inclusive and focus on people, but most of the time, initiatives are still top-down and focused on security. Some notable exceptions are programs for young people in Niger and getting religious leaders involved in Nigeria. These show that localized responses can make things more legitimate and last longer.

5. International Support and Donor Dependency: ECOWAS has gotten a lot of help from international groups like the European Union, United Nations, and African Union. However, the dependency on external funding has created vulnerabilities in program continuity and agenda-setting. Member states have had a hard time getting enough domestic resources to keep up their counterterrorism efforts on their own, which raises questions about how long they will be able to do so.

Contribution to Knowledge and Policy

This study contributes to the literature on regional security, counterterrorism, and African institutional responses to violent extremism. First, it shows how regional groups like ECOWAS can be both proactive and reactive when it comes to dealing with transnational threats. Second, it points out the difference between strategic vision and implementation reality, which is mostly due to differences in institutional capacity and levels of political commitment. Lastly, the study introduces an inclusive lens that focuses on how important

community involvement and state-society relations are in getting good results in the fight against terrorism.

From a policy perspective, the findings point to several critical areas for reform:

• ECOWAS needs to change its strategic focus, so that "prevention" and "reconstruction" are just as important as "enforcement."

• National governments should decentralize the fight against terrorism and make sure that traditional authorities, civil society groups, and youth networks all work together.

• The CTS Implementation Framework needs to be updated to include ways to regularly check progress across states and hold people accountable. • Sustainable domestic funding models should be given priority so that countries don't rely too much on foreign donors and ensure greater ownership of national and regional initiatives.

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Appendix

Map of the Sahel Region

Source: The Conversation News outlet Sahel region, Africa

Note: This Master Thesis only talks about the part of the Sahel region that is under ECOWAS's control from 2015 to 2025. This time period includes the time when the AES States left ECOWAS. Chad, Mauritania, and Sudan are not included, but a part of the literature includes both Mauritania and Chad as members of the G-5 Sahel Force and the Multinational Joint Task Force respectively.

Research Instruments - Full survey questionnaires

Section 1: Understanding Implementation at National Level

Can you describe how your country or institution has contributed to the implementation of ECOWAS's counter-terrorism strategy over the past decade?

What coordination mechanisms exist between ECOWAS and national security agencies in your country?

What have been the main operational or institutional challenges in implementing ECOWAS counter-terrorism measures in your country?

Section 2: Evaluating Regional Cooperation and Strategic Efficacy

In your view, how effective has ECOWAS been in promoting regional cooperation on counterterrorism in the Sahel?

Can you cite any specific successes or failures that illustrate the impact of ECOWAS interventions on extremist violence in the region?

Section 3: Perceptions, Strengths, and Gaps

What would you identify as the most significant strength of the ECOWAS counter-terrorism framework?

How inclusive is the strategy in terms of engaging civil society, local communities, and regional youth in countering violent extremism?

Section 4: Recommendations and Forward-Looking Insights

What lessons can be drawn from the past 10 years of ECOWAS's counter-terrorism work in the Sahel?

How can ECOWAS improve its coordination with the African Union, the UN, and national governments going forward?

What policy or structural changes would you recommend for greater efficacy in the next phase of regional counter-terrorism efforts?

Do you think ECOWAS has been successful in the regional fight against Terrorism in the Sahel in the last ten years?

Final Reflection

What is your personal view on the role of Civil Society Organizations and youth groups in fighting terrorism at the grassroots, national, and regional level in West Africa?

Table A1: Comparative Summary of National Implementation of the ECOWAS Counter-Terrorism Strategy (2015–2025)

Country	ECTS Integration Level	Implementation Strengths	Implementation Weaknesses	Strategic Pillar Focus
Senegal	High Legal alignment; moderate ECOWARN usage	Strong political stability; harmonized center-terrorism laws	Limited involvement in regional joint military	Prevention focused, moderate in enforcement
Nigeria	High engagement in joint operations (MNJTF)	Strong institutional capacity; operational coordination mechanisms	Civil-military tensions; low public trust in counter-terrorism programs	Enforcement-heavy, limited in reconstruction
Niger	Moderate integration across all pillars	Youth-centered CVE initiatives; effective ECOWARN uptake	Persistent border insecurity; weak post-conflict reconstruction planning	Balanced, emphasis on prevention and enforcement
Mali	Low post-2015 integration due to coups	Ongoing participation in ECOWAS dialogues	Political instability; dependency on non-ECOWAS security actors	Reactive enforcement, weak on prevention and reconstruction
Burkina Faso	Fragmented and reactive engagement	Public awareness campaigns; ad	Military rule; externally driven strategies;	Weak across all pillars,

		hoc national responses	institutional disintegration	particularly in reconstruction

Summary of strategic pillars (prevention, enforcement, reconstruction)

Assessment of institutional actions taken by ECOWAS and member states

•Comparative review of national-level implementation

Please find attached the ECOWAS Counterterrorism IMPLEMENTATION-PLAN-CT.pdf