

Policy Brief

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When fighting terrorism promotes safe havens: experimental evidence from the Lake Chad basin

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Introduction

In recent years, terrorist organisations in Africa have undergone significant transformation. Their expanding reach and influence are no longer confined by national borders, causing destabilisation across the continent. This expansion is fed not only by the physical spread of violent extremist actors, but by reverberations across borders through “abstract terrorism”—the violence orchestrated by armed groups in solidarity with counterparts situated elsewhere. The expansion of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) from Algeria into places like Mali; the havoc caused by the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) in Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso; the regional reach of Al-Shabaab from Somalia into Uganda, Kenya, and Ethiopia; and the impact of Boko Haram, officially known as the Jamā’at Ahl as-Sunnah lid-Da’wah wa’l-Jihād, on communities in Nigeria, Chad, Cameroon, and Niger each reflect the interplay of physical and symbolic presence.

The application of “abstract” terror allows transnational extremists to overcome physical and financial constraints associated with operating beyond borders. The use of strategic messaging that amplifies narratives of marginalisation and threat from governing authorities and Western actors fosters

their expansion of influence in what become ‘safe havens’ communities. Narrative strategies employed by terrorist groups exploit a sense of shared victimhood, using religion and cultural values to gain trust and support. Regional security responses, particularly those operating in coordination with international actors, such as the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) targeting Boko Haram in the Lake Chad Basin and the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) to counter al-Shabaab thus face the challenge of countering these messages alongside tangible threats of violence and insecurity.

Counterterrorism efforts are complicated by local distrust of security actors. This distrust is based in nearly universal exposure to violence and compounded by the messaging of terrorist groups that exploit histories of civilian abuse by military forces and frame multinational security partnerships as anti-Islam. In numerous sub-Saharan African nations, violent attacks and arbitrary reprisals against local populations by security actors have led to significant distrust among local communities who find themselves stuck between warring parties, both state and non-state. This creates a conducive environment from which terrorist safe havens thrive. Terrorist groups frame counterterrorism efforts as anti-Islamic and led by Western institutions as

partners of the MNJTF; this fuels suspicions and hampers community trust.

Findings from our forthcoming study supported by XCEPT indicate trust in multinational security partnerships is negatively affected by partnership with Western states, whom local populations believe are Islamophobic. Trust is reduced further when partnership with a Western ally is combined with anti-terrorism campaigns framed as fighting “Islamic terrorism” as opposed to the more neutral “terrorism”. The use of non-neutral language for targets of anti-terrorism campaigns implicates the identity and religious and cultural sensibilities of local populations and serves to reduce trust. Finally, the impact of exposure to war-related violence is universal across the population with variation only in the diversity of type of violence experienced. Exposure to violence not only reduces trust, but also leaves fertile ground from which terrorist groups create and nurture safe havens.

Methods

This research is grounded in two key inquiries: identifying the factors influencing trust in multinational responses to terrorism in Africa; and examining the role of narrative framing as either fostering or undermining support for multinational anti-terrorism campaigns. The study’s findings arise from a household survey (n = 1,195) conducted in August 2023 among a systematic random sample of residents of Borno State, Nigeria within the Lake Chad Basin, a region known for its association with terrorism.

The survey focused on popular attitudes toward the MNJTF. It measured responses to four vignettes (treatment conditions) that highlighted MNJTF association with an international actor (European Union vs. Arab League) and two different framings used to describe the target of the MNJTF anti-terrorism campaigns (Islamic terrorism vs. terrorism). The survey scenario was constructed as a hypothetical MNJTF soldier seeking cooperation from someone “like” the respondent. Participants were randomly assigned to one of four treatment groups, each associated with a different vignette. Survey conditions were adjusted to (1) avoid the possibility that treatment conditions might not correspond with the participant’s lived experience and (2) elicit greater honesty through indirect questioning on sensitive topics.

Findings

The study unveils novel insights into the limitations

and sociopolitical ramifications of Western engagement in counterterrorism efforts in border communities in Africa:

- **National MNJTF forces are generally supported:** when asked to share perceptions of the MNJTF, apart from its interaction with other international actors and security partnerships, 82.1% of respondents expressed trust in the MNJTF; 8% indicated distrust.
- **Western assistance reduces support for MNJTF, while support from perceived allies increases support for MNJTF:** trust in multinational security partnerships diminished when these partnerships were framed as involving Western states. In contrast, greater trust is expressed in multinational partnerships that involve collaboration with Arab states. Narrative framing of the MNJTF as fighting terrorism and partnering with the Arab League elicited a 6.2% increase in trust.
- **Associating the MNJTF with the EU to counter “Islamic terrorism” engenders the least trust; Indicating the MNJTF is working with Arab states to counter general “terrorism” yields the most:** the lowest levels of trust in the MNJTF surfaced with the narrative framing of an MNJTF partnership with the EU to fight Islamic terrorism (17.6% decrease in trust in the MNJTF). In contrast, describing the MNJTF as working in partnership with the Arab League to the more general aim of counter ‘terrorism’ elicited a 6.2% increase in trust in the multinational security partnership. The effect of target framing (i.e. fighting “terrorism” or “Islamic terrorism”) and the identity of MNJTF partners is statistically and substantively significant.
- **Nearly all participants were exposed to war-related violence:** 33% of participants experienced high exposure, 41% moderate exposure, and 26% low exposure to violence. Situated between multiple armed groups, both state and non-state, the local population finds itself repeatedly subject to various forms of war-related violence. The survey findings indicate that exposure to violence reduces trust in multinational security partnerships. Furthermore, the results suggest that people with higher exposure to violence are more inclined to express distrust in MNJTF efforts framed as targeting “Islamic terrorism” and operating in partnership with the EU.

Policy implications

Findings from this research reveal important policy implications:

- 1. Engagement with local communities is key** to the success and sustainability of multinational security partnerships like MNJTF. Local communities should be engaged as partners rather than beneficiaries of or threats to security efforts.
- 2. Multinational security partnerships would do well to train security forces**, especially those engaging at the most local levels, using trauma-informed principles of human security, conflict-related sexual violence, and sexual exploitation and abuse. Further training on the precarious position of local communities, as both arenas for terrorist activity and victims of terrorist violence, is important.
- 3. Demonstrating accountability for violence** committed by multinational security partnerships against local communities is critical to combatting shared victimisation narratives used by terrorist organizations. This includes legal and financial consequences for security forces that violate human rights and compromise human security.
- 4. Framing of multinational security partnerships should be carefully crafted** to align with narratives that most resonate with local communities. This includes the framing of states involved in the partnership and the target of security operations. An understanding of historic grievances and conflict dynamics is important when crafting these narrative framings.
- 5. Positioning multinational security partnerships as addressing a more neutral threat** may be more useful than focusing on a specific threat laden with identity markers that implicate the identities and religious and cultural beliefs of local communities – i.e. “terrorism” vs. “Islamic terrorism” in the case of the MNJTF and Lake Chad basin.

About XCEPT

The Cross-Border Conflict Evidence, Policy and Trends (XCEPT) research programme brings together world-leading experts and local researchers to examine conflict-affected borderlands, how conflicts connect across borders, and the drivers of violent and peaceful behaviour. Funded by UK International Development, XCEPT offers actionable research to inform policies and programmes that support peace. The views expressed in this material do not necessarily reflect the UK government's official policies.

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About the authors

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