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**TRANS-NATIONAL SECURITY THREATS IN AFRICA: ASSESSING THE
POLITICAL, ECONOMIC, AND SOCIAL IMPACT OF TERRORISM,
MARITIME PIRACY, AND HUMAN TRAFFICKING NETWORKS**

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Trans-National Security Threats in Africa: Assessing The Political, Economic, And Social Impact of Terrorism, Maritime Piracy, And Human Trafficking Networks

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Abstract:

Purpose of study: This study assesses trans-national security threats in Africa by examining the political, economic, and social impacts of terrorism, maritime piracy, and human trafficking networks.

Methodology: The study adopts a qualitative document-based approach, drawing on recent peer-reviewed academic literature and reports from recognised international and regional organisations. Secondary sources were thematically reviewed to examine terrorism in the Sahel and Lake Chad Basin, piracy in the Gulf of Guinea, and trafficking and migrant smuggling across West and North Africa, emphasizing contemporary evidence and comparative analysis.

Findings: The findings demonstrate that terrorism, maritime piracy, and human trafficking constitute interconnected trans-national security threats whose effects extend beyond immediate security concerns. Terrorism undermines political stability, displaces populations, disrupts livelihoods, and increases government expenditure on defence. Maritime piracy raises insurance and transportation costs, disrupts maritime trade, affects ports, and threatens coastal livelihoods. Human trafficking causes severe social and economic harm, including exploitation, trauma, loss of human capital, and illicit financial flows. The analysis further establishes that weak governance, poverty, marginalisation, corruption, inadequate border controls, and fragmented legal systems facilitate these threats. Their networks also intersect through shared routes, resources, vulnerable populations, and financing mechanisms. Existing regional responses remain constrained by limited institutional capacity, weak coordination, donor dependence, and insufficient legal harmonisation.

Conclusion: The study concludes that Africa's trans-national security threats require integrated, African-led responses rather than isolated national or predominantly militarised interventions. Strengthening regional institutions, harmonising legal frameworks, improving intelligence and border cooperation, addressing socio-economic inequalities, and investing in governance are essential for sustainable security. External assistance should reinforce, rather than replace, African institutional ownership and capacity.

Keywords: *trans-national security, terrorism, Sahel, maritime piracy, Gulf of Guinea, human trafficking, migrant smuggling, regional cooperation*

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1. Introduction

1.1 Background of the Study

Transnational security threats have become increasingly complex as terrorist, criminal and trafficking networks operate across territorial boundaries and exploit weaknesses in governance, border management, economies and social protection systems. Terrorism, maritime piracy and human trafficking are particularly significant because their effects extend beyond immediate security concerns to political stability, economic activity, livelihoods, migration and social cohesion. The transnational nature of these threats makes them difficult for individual states to address independently because recruitment, financing, transportation, attacks and exploitation may occur across several jurisdictions.

Terrorism has emerged as a major security concern, particularly in fragile and conflict-affected environments. The Global Terrorism Index 2025 reports that the Sahel accounted for 51% of global terrorism deaths in 2024, demonstrating the growing concentration of terrorist violence in Africa (Institute for Economics & Peace [IEP], 2025). Nigeria recorded 565 terrorism-related deaths, while Cameroon recorded 205 deaths from 153 terrorist incidents during the same year (IEP, 2025). These developments demonstrate how terrorism can undermine state authority, displace populations, discourage investment and intensify public expenditure on security.

Maritime piracy constitutes another important dimension of transnational insecurity, particularly for African states dependent on maritime trade and coastal livelihoods. The International Maritime Bureau (IMB) recorded 116 piracy and armed-robbery incidents globally in 2024, including six hijackings and 126 crew members taken hostage (International Chamber of Commerce [ICC], 2025). The Gulf of Guinea recorded 18 incidents, while waters around Somalia and the Gulf of Aden recorded eight incidents during 2024. The continued capacity of Somali pirates to target vessels more than 1,000 nautical miles from the Somali coast demonstrates the geographical reach of maritime insecurity (ICC, 2025).

Human trafficking similarly demonstrates how organized crime exploits poverty, migration and institutional weaknesses. UNODC (2024) reports that Nigeria detected 4,215 trafficking victims over a three-year period, while only 101 cases were successfully prosecuted, illustrating challenges in translating investigations into effective criminal-justice outcomes. In Kenya, the government identified 201 trafficking victims in 2023, including victims of labour and sexual exploitation, while 36 Kenyan victims were identified as having been exploited abroad. The United States Department of State (2024) further reported that Kenya lacked a centralized law-enforcement data system for trafficking crimes, potentially contributing to underreporting and difficulties in accurately assessing the national scale of trafficking.

Kenya's geographical position makes these threats particularly relevant to national security. Its borders with Somalia, Ethiopia, South Sudan, Uganda and Tanzania, together with its extensive Indian Ocean coastline, connect the country to regional migration, trade and security networks. Terrorist activities associated with Al-Shabaab have therefore implications for political stability, public safety, tourism and local livelihoods, while trafficking networks exploit border crossings, migration routes and vulnerable populations. Maritime insecurity also has implications for Kenya's ports, fisheries, tourism and coastal communities. Consequently, terrorism, maritime piracy and human trafficking should not be examined as isolated crimes. Their overlapping effects on governance, economic activity, livelihoods and social wellbeing demonstrate the need for an integrated assessment of transnational security threats and stronger cooperation among African states, regional institutions and international security actors.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Transnational security threats pose a growing challenge to African states because terrorism, maritime piracy and human trafficking increasingly operate through networks that transcend national borders. Their consequences extend beyond conventional security concerns to affect political stability, economic activity, livelihoods, migration and social cohesion. The scale of terrorism is particularly evident in the Sahel, which accounted for 51% of global terrorism deaths in 2024, while Nigeria recorded 565 terrorism-related deaths and Cameroon recorded 205 deaths from 153 terrorist incidents (Institute for Economics & Peace [IEP], 2025). Human trafficking presents a similarly persistent challenge. UNODC (2024) reports that Nigeria detected 4,215 trafficking victims over a three-year period but recorded only 101 successfully prosecuted cases, indicating weaknesses in converting investigations into effective criminal-justice outcomes.

Maritime insecurity further complicates the situation. The International Maritime Bureau recorded 116 piracy and armed-robbery incidents globally in 2024, including 18 in the Gulf of Guinea, while eight incidents were reported around Somalia and the Gulf of Aden (ICC, 2025). In Kenya, authorities identified 201 trafficking victims in 2023, while the absence of a centralized trafficking-crime data system hindered accurate measurement of the problem (U.S. Department of State, 2024). Despite national, regional and international responses, existing evidence frequently examines terrorism, piracy and human trafficking separately. Consequently, limited attention has been given to their combined political, economic and social impacts within the African context, particularly how these interconnected threats influence governance, trade, livelihoods, migration and social cohesion. This study therefore seeks to assess the political, economic and social impact of terrorism, maritime piracy and human trafficking networks as interconnected transnational security threats in Africa.

2. Conceptualizing Trans-National Security Threats

The concept of a trans-national security threat departs from the traditional, state-centric understanding of security that dominated strategic thinking during and immediately after the Cold War. Traditional approaches treated the state as both the primary referent of security and the principal actor responsible for providing it, so that insecurity was understood chiefly as a function of interstate rivalry or internal rebellion against a sitting government. Trans-national threats do not fit neatly into either category. Their actors frequently hold no formal territorial claim and reject the legitimacy of the state altogether; their operations depend on the ability to move across the very borders that are supposed to demarcate sovereign authority; and their consequences, whether measured in displaced populations, disrupted trade, or diverted public revenue, are rarely confined to the country in which a given incident occurs.

Three criteria distinguish a genuinely trans-national threat from a threat that is merely widespread within a single country. First, the actors involved must be active in two or more sovereign states, whether through direct operational presence, coordinated logistics, or shared leadership structures that span national borders. Second, the material and financial resources that sustain the threat, including fighters, weapons, ransom payments, and trafficked persons, must cross international borders as a routine part of the threat's operation rather than as an occasional exception to an otherwise domestic pattern. Third, no single national government can reasonably be expected to resolve the threat through domestic jurisdiction and capacity alone, because the sources of the threat lie partly, or wholly, beyond its borders, and because unilateral action by one state may simply displace the threat into a neighbouring jurisdiction rather than eliminating it. Terrorism in the Sahel and Lake Chad Basin, piracy in the Gulf of Guinea, and trafficking and smuggling networks in West and North Africa each satisfy all three criteria, which is why they are treated together in this paper as a coherent category of analysis, even though they differ substantially in their tactics, their victims, and their visibility to international audiences.

It is worth noting, in addition, that trans-national threats of this kind rarely emerge from a single cause. They are better understood as symptoms of underlying structural conditions, including weak state presence in border regions, the marginalisation of particular ethnic or regional communities, chronic youth unemployment, and the absence of harmonised legal and judicial frameworks between neighbouring states. These structural conditions recur across all three case studies examined in this paper, and their persistence helps to explain why threats that are analytically distinct in their tactics are, in practice, mutually reinforcing.

3. Methodological Approach

This paper adopts a qualitative, document-based method of analysis, drawing on recently published, peer-reviewed academic literature, together with reports from recognised intergovernmental organisations, to assess the political, economic, and social dimensions of the

three selected threats. The literature was selected on the basis of thematic relevance to each case, recency of publication, and the credibility of the outlet in which it appeared, with priority given to studies published within the past five years so that the analysis reflects the most current available evidence on trends that continue to evolve rapidly. The paper does not present new primary data; rather, it synthesises existing scholarship in order to identify patterns that are common across the three threats and that are not always visible when each threat is examined in isolation. This approach is appropriate for an assessment of this kind because it allows for a comparative reading of evidence that has, until now, largely been generated within separate and often disconnected bodies of literature, namely counter-terrorism studies, maritime security studies, and migration and trafficking studies. The limitations associated with this approach are discussed further in Section 10.

4. Terrorism and Violent Extremism in the Sahel and Lake Chad Basin

4.1 The Regionalisation of Jihadist Violence

Terrorism in the Sahel has evolved from a series of localised insurgencies into a regional phenomenon whose political and humanitarian consequences extend across at least six countries. Armed groups such as JNIM and the Islamic State Sahel Province exploit the limited presence of state security forces in border areas to move personnel, weapons, and funds between Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso with relative ease, while Boko Haram and its offshoot, the Islamic State West Africa Province, sustain a parallel insurgency around the Lake Chad Basin that spans Nigeria, Cameroon, Chad, and Niger. Two decades of foreign-backed counter-terrorism assistance, including the United States' Trans-Saharan Counterterrorism Partnership, have not reversed this trajectory. Zhu and Gao (2024) argue that the number of active extremist groups and the frequency of attacks in the Sahel have continued to increase, in part because heavily militarised counter-terrorism assistance has neglected the social and economic drivers of radicalisation that create a steady supply of new recruits. Their analysis suggests that the underlying problem is not simply one of insufficient capacity, but of a persistent misalignment between the interests of external partners, who tend to prioritise the containment of transnational terrorism as a matter of their own national security, and the interests of local populations, who often experience the counter-terrorism campaign itself as a further source of insecurity.

The human cost of this violence is difficult to overstate. Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger have each recorded thousands of terrorism-related deaths annually in recent years, making the central Sahel the area most affected by terrorism anywhere in the world by most conventional measures. The distribution of this violence, however, is not random. Piombo, Kallel, and Englebert (2024) demonstrate that historically marginalised communities are disproportionately likely to become sources of grievance and recruitment for jihadist groups, and that governments in the region

respond less forcefully and less evenly in these areas than elsewhere, a dynamic that compounds pre-existing exclusion rather than resolving it. Their study, based on comparative analysis of state responses across Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso, finds that where a region's historical relationship with the central state has been marked by neglect or repression, that same region tends to experience both a higher concentration of jihadist activity and a state response that is either excessively coercive or largely absent, neither of which succeeds in reducing the appeal of armed groups to the local population. This pattern of uneven and often coercive state response has fed a cycle of insecurity, eroded public confidence in civilian government, and set the stage for a succession of military takeovers, in Mali in 2020 and 2021, in Burkina Faso in 2022, and in Niger in 2023, each justified publicly by the perceived failure of civilian authorities to contain extremist violence.

4.2 Political, Economic, and Social Consequences

The political consequences of this dynamic have already reshaped the map of regional cooperation in West Africa. Following their respective coups, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger formed the Alliance of Sahel States, withdrew from the Economic Community of West African States, and began constructing parallel institutions for defence and economic cooperation outside the traditional regional bloc. This fragmentation of the region's principal integration framework illustrates how a security crisis that begins as a localised insurgency can ultimately restructure the political architecture of an entire sub-region, with consequences for trade, freedom of movement, and collective security arrangements that will likely persist well beyond the immediate counter-insurgency campaign. It also demonstrates a broader lesson that recurs throughout this paper: security failures at the local level can generate political consequences that ripple outward to reshape institutions at the continental level, well beyond the geographic reach of the original threat.

The economic and social toll of the violence is equally severe. Millions of people have been displaced across the Sahel and the Lake Chad Basin, agricultural production and cross-border trade have been disrupted in areas that were once relatively productive, and scarce public revenue that could otherwise support development has been redirected toward defence spending rather than toward education, health, or infrastructure. Ojiego-Okoro, Umeh, and Nwodom (2024) document how Boko Haram-induced displacement in the Lake Chad Basin has undermined social and economic development well beyond the immediate zones of conflict, disrupting fishing, farming, and trading livelihoods that entire communities depended upon before the insurgency began. Their research indicates that displaced households frequently lose access not only to land and livestock but also to the informal credit and trading networks that had previously allowed them to manage seasonal fluctuations in income, meaning that the economic consequences of displacement persist long after a household has physically resettled elsewhere. Socially, the closure of thousands of schools across the affected areas has denied an entire generation of children access to education,

compounding the poverty and exclusion that make recruitment into armed groups more likely rather than less, and creating a self-reinforcing cycle in which today's insecurity produces the conditions for tomorrow's recruitment.

4.3 The Trans-National Dimension and Regional Response

The trans-national character of the threat is visible in the geography of the violence itself. Fighters, weapons, and funds move routinely through the Mali-Niger-Burkina Faso tri-border area, and the affected governments have depended on regional mechanisms such as the now-weakened G5 Sahel Joint Force and the Multinational Joint Task Force against Boko Haram, both of which were built on the explicit premise that no single state could address the threat unilaterally. The gradual weakening of the G5 Sahel framework, following the withdrawal of several of its members and the broader rupture between the Alliance of Sahel States and the Economic Community of West African States, has left a considerable coordination gap in the region precisely at the moment when cross-border cooperation is most needed. The Boko Haram insurgency illustrates the spillover dynamic with particular force: an uprising that began in north-eastern Nigeria has pushed fighters, refugees, and weapons across borders into Cameroon's Far North region, into Chad, and into Niger, converting what began as a national insurgency into a basin-wide humanitarian and security emergency that now requires coordination among four separate national governments, each with different resources, priorities, and political constraints.

Zhu and Gao (2024) further observe that the heavy emphasis on equipment transfers and combat training within international counter-terrorism assistance can, paradoxically, reinforce extremist propaganda that portrays foreign-backed governments as illegitimate, thereby assisting rather than undermining recruitment. This finding has direct implications for how external partners design their assistance programmes, suggesting that resources directed exclusively toward hardware and tactical training may be less effective, and in some cases counter-productive, compared with resources directed toward governance reform, judicial capacity, and the socio-economic drivers of radicalisation identified by Piombo, Kallel, and Englebert (2024). Trans-national terrorism in the Sahel is, in this sense, a problem that no single nation, and no purely military strategy, is likely to resolve on its own; it requires sustained attention to the political economy of exclusion that has allowed armed groups to embed themselves within specific communities over more than a decade.

5. Maritime Piracy and Insecurity in the Gulf of Guinea

5.1 The Character and Scale of the Threat

For more than a decade, the waters of the Gulf of Guinea, stretching from Senegal to Angola, have been considered among the most dangerous maritime zones in the world for international shipping. Incidents in the Gulf of Guinea differ in important respects from those historically associated with

the Horn of Africa: most take place within territorial waters rather than on the high seas, and are classified as armed robbery rather than piracy in the strict legal sense, since they typically involve boarding a vessel by force, stealing cargo or fuel, and kidnapping crew members for ransom rather than seizing the ship itself for extended periods (Ahorsu, Yaro, & Attachie, 2024). Nigeria's coastal waters, particularly the corridors around Bonny and the Niger Delta, have historically accounted for a disproportionate share of recorded incidents, although coordinated naval operations, including Nigeria's Deep Blue Project, have contributed to a measurable decline in attacks since 2021. Ahorsu, Yaro, and Attachie (2024) situate this pattern within a broader securitisation framework, arguing that piracy in the Gulf of Guinea has increasingly been framed by regional and international actors as an existential threat to trade and state revenue, a framing that has justified the mobilisation of naval and diplomatic resources on a scale that would not have been considered a decade earlier.

5.2 Economic and Institutional Consequences

The economic consequences of maritime insecurity extend well beyond the states in which individual attacks occur. Yercan, Cetin, and Conguloglu (2025) show that piracy in the Gulf of Guinea imposes significant costs through higher insurance premiums, longer transit times caused by rerouting, and increased port congestion, costs that are ultimately passed on to consumers through the prices of imported goods across the entire region. Their analysis further finds that the perceived risk associated with the Gulf of Guinea has led shipping companies to adopt costly protective measures, including the use of armed guards and escort vessels for high-value cargo such as crude oil and gas, expenses that are rarely absorbed by the shipping companies themselves but are instead transferred to importers and, ultimately, to consumers in the affected countries. These effects work directly against the ambitions of the African Continental Free Trade Area, because the combination of unreliable and costly shipping discourages carriers from calling regularly at ports across West and Central Africa, which in turn limits the volume of intra-African trade that the Free Trade Area was designed to expand. The presence of armed groups at sea has also been linked to illegal oil bunkering in the Niger Delta, a practice that diverts crude oil to unauthorised markets and finances further criminal activity on land, compounding the direct economic losses associated with attacks at sea and illustrating once again how a maritime threat generates consequences that are felt well inland.

The principal institutional response to this threat has taken the form of regional cooperation rather than unilateral naval deployment. The 2013 Yaoundé Code of Conduct established five maritime zones across the Gulf of Guinea, each coordinated by a regional centre responsible for information sharing and coordinated patrols among coastal states. Yet Schandorf (2024) argues that the resulting Yaoundé Architecture continues to struggle with weak governance capacity, heavy reliance on external donor funding, most notably from the European Union, and slow information

sharing among national navies, so that durable maritime security in the region depends on deeper political commitment rather than naval capability alone. Applying an infrastructure-based theoretical lens, Schandorf (2024) contends that the coordination centres established under the Yaoundé framework function more as physical infrastructure than as genuinely integrated command structures, meaning that information collected at one centre does not always translate efficiently into coordinated action across the wider network of participating states. The piracy problem in the Gulf of Guinea therefore illustrates how a threat that appears geographically confined to a maritime zone can generate consequences that extend across an entire regional economy, and how institutional architecture alone, without the political will to operationalise it fully, may fall short of the coordination that a genuinely trans-national threat requires.

Table 1 summarises the principal dimensions of the three threats examined in this paper and situates them alongside their principal regional and institutional responses, for ease of comparison.

5.3 The Multinational Character of Maritime Incidents

The multinational character of the vessels, crews, and cargo involved compounds the trans-national dimension of the threat still further. An attack off the Nigerian coast can simultaneously implicate ships and crew members from several flag states, together with insurance companies and naval assets drawn from more than one continent. This reality has produced a growing pattern of extra-regional naval engagement, including bilateral assistance such as French-supplied patrol vessels for Senegal and Côte d'Ivoire, alongside coordinated maritime operations sponsored by the European Union. While this external assistance has contributed to the decline in recorded incidents over recent years, it also raises the same question that arises in the Sahel counter-terrorism context: whether security gains that depend heavily on foreign rather than domestic capacity is likely to prove sustainable once external attention or funding shifts elsewhere, particularly at a time when European donors face competing security priorities closer to home. This concern is echoed by Schandorf (2024), whose infrastructure-based analysis suggests that the Yaoundé Architecture's continued dependence on external funding represents a structural vulnerability rather than a temporary transitional arrangement, since the regional centres established under the framework have not yet developed independent, domestically generated financing mechanisms of their own.

6. Trans-National Human Trafficking and Migrant Smuggling Networks

6.1 Corridors, Actors, and Mechanisms

The third major trans-national challenge examined in this paper is the convergence of human trafficking with migrant smuggling along routes that connect West Africa, the Sahel, North Africa, and, ultimately, Europe. Anguita-Olmedo (2025) identifies three principal corridors along which

this convergence occurs: a route toward Libya that passes through Niger and the city of Agadez before reaching the central Mediterranean; an Atlantic route toward the Canary Islands that departs from Mauritania, The Gambia, and Senegal; and a Sahel route toward Algeria and Morocco that runs through Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. Criminal networks exploit structural vulnerabilities, including poverty, weak governance, food insecurity, and armed conflict, to offer migrants transport in exchange for payment, an arrangement that frequently degenerates into debt bondage, forced labour, or sexual exploitation once migrants are unable to meet the demands attached to their journey. Anguita-Olmedo's fieldwork, which included interviews with security officials, humanitarian actors, and academic experts on migration, indicates that the criminal actors operating along these corridors increasingly function less as loosely organised smugglers and more as structured criminal governance systems, in the sense that they impose informal rules, taxation, and even forms of protection on migrants passing through territory they control, particularly around transit hubs such as Agadez.

The scale of this problem is considerable. Anguita-Olmedo (2025) estimates that approximately one quarter of recorded international trafficking in persons originates in Sub-Saharan Africa, with victims from the region identified in more than sixty countries of destination. Nigeria remains a significant source country for trafficking, with tens of thousands of citizens trafficked annually, primarily for sexual and labour exploitation, much of it moving through the Nigeria-Benin border corridor. As with terrorism and piracy, this trade depends on corrupt or under-resourced border agencies, judicial impunity, and the absence of harmonised legal frameworks among neighbouring states, weaknesses that traffickers exploit systematically rather than opportunistically (Ojolo & Singh, 2025). Ojolo and Singh (2025), drawing on a systematic review of twenty relevant studies, conclude that trans-national organised crime in Africa, including trafficking and smuggling, is sustained by three overlapping enabling conditions: chronic political instability, systemic corruption within the agencies responsible for border and judicial enforcement, and enduring socio-economic hardship among the populations most exposed to recruitment by criminal networks.

6.2 Economic, Social, and Gendered Consequences

The consequences of trafficking and smuggling extend well beyond the individuals directly affected. Global estimates jointly produced by the International Labour Organization, Walk Free, and the International Organization for Migration (2022) indicate that forced labour generates tens of billions of dollars in illicit profit worldwide each year, a substantial share of which is concentrated in Africa, where forced labour and forced sexual exploitation together generate several billion dollars in illicit profit annually and where the region accounts for one of the highest concentrations of forced labour victims relative to population size anywhere in the world. These illicit financial flows increasingly intersect with the financing structures of armed and extremist

groups operating along the same corridors, reinforcing the connection between trafficking networks and the terrorism examined in Section 4. Ojolo and Singh (2025) similarly find that the rapid expansion of digital technology and globalisation has broadened the operational reach of trans-national organised crime networks across the continent, allowing them to coordinate logistics and financial transfers with a sophistication that outpaces the institutional capacity of many national law enforcement agencies, including the emergence of cybercrime networks originating in West Africa that now extend their operations well beyond the continent itself.

Socially, the removal of young, economically productive individuals from their communities through trafficking erodes the human capital of states that can least afford the loss, while the psychological and physical harm experienced by trafficked persons imposes long-term costs on families and communities that persist long after any individual case has been resolved. Regional and international cooperation, including the West Africa Coalition Against Trafficking in Persons and Smuggling of Migrants, established in 2024, represents a growing institutional response to this problem, but enforcement continues to be constrained by the covert nature of trafficking operations and by the absence of judicial coordination between the countries through which victims and migrants pass. The absence of such coordination means that a trafficker who is prosecuted, or evades prosecution, in one country can frequently resume operations in a neighbouring jurisdiction with minimal disruption, a pattern that closely mirrors the jurisdictional gaps exploited by armed groups in the Sahel and by pirate networks in the Gulf of Guinea.

The threat also carries a distinctly gendered dimension. Women and girls are trafficked disproportionately for sexual exploitation and forced marriage, while men and boys are more often trafficked into forced agricultural, fishing, or small-scale mining labour (Anguita-Olmedo, 2025). Children bear a particularly severe burden: international operations coordinated by Interpol have rescued dozens of child victims from forced labour in West African gold mines and from domestic servitude in a single sweep, and there is documented convergence between JNIM, Islamic State-affiliated groups, and trafficking networks, with children used as porters and women exploited as a form of reward for armed actors in several of the affected areas. This convergence between armed groups and trafficking networks, evident along both the Sahel and Lake Chad corridors, underscores the argument developed further in Section 8, namely that the three threats examined in this paper cannot be fully understood, or effectively addressed, in isolation from one another.

7. Comparative Overview of the Three Threats

Although terrorism, piracy, and trafficking differ substantially in their tactics, their victims, and their visibility to international audiences, they share a common structure that is summarised in Table 1 below. Each threat is sustained by weak governance in border or coastal regions; each depends on the routine movement of people, weapons, or funds across two or more sovereign

jurisdictions; and each has generated a regional institutional response whose effectiveness has been constrained by dependence on external funding, limited information sharing, or the absence of harmonised legal frameworks among the states involved.

Table 1. Comparative summary of three major trans-national security threats in Africa

Dimension	Terrorism and violent extremism (Sahel and Lake Chad Basin)	Maritime piracy and armed robbery (Gulf of Guinea)	Human trafficking and migrant smuggling (West and North Africa)
Principal actors	JNIM, Islamic State Sahel Province, Boko Haram, Islamic State West Africa Province	Armed criminal networks operating from Nigeria's Niger Delta and neighbouring coastal states	Trans-national criminal networks and facilitators operating along Libyan, Atlantic, and Sahel corridors
Countries directly implicated	Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Nigeria, Cameroon, Chad	Nigeria, Benin, Togo, Ghana, Côte d'Ivoire, Cameroon, and other Gulf of Guinea littoral states	Nigeria, Niger, Mali, Burkina Faso, Mauritania, The Gambia, Senegal, Libya, Algeria, Morocco
Cross-border resource flows	Fighters, weapons, ransom payments	Stolen cargo and fuel, ransom payments, illicitly bunkered oil	Trafficked persons, smuggling fees, debt-bondage payments
Principal economic consequence	Diversion of public revenue to defence; disrupted agriculture and trade	Higher insurance premiums, rerouting costs, reduced port calls	Loss of human capital; illicit profits estimated in the billions of dollars annually
Principal social consequence	Mass displacement; school closures; erosion of trust in civilian government	Reduced maritime employment; disrupted coastal livelihoods	Family and community trauma; gendered exploitation patterns
Principal regional response mechanism	G5 Sahel Joint Force (weakened); Multinational Joint Task Force against Boko Haram	Yaoundé Code of Conduct and Yaoundé Architecture	West Africa Coalition Against Trafficking in Persons and Smuggling of Migrants (2024)
Key constraint on response effectiveness	Over-militarised, externally funded assistance that neglects socio-economic drivers	Weak governance capacity and heavy donor dependence	Covert operations and lack of cross-border judicial coordination

8. Cumulative Impact and Interaction Among the Three Threats

Terrorism, maritime piracy, and human trafficking are frequently analysed as separate policy problems, yet the evidence reviewed in this paper suggests that they are better understood as interconnected dimensions of a single, continent-wide security challenge. Smuggling routes and kidnapping operations that generate ransom payments serve simultaneously as mechanisms for the movement of jihadist fighters and as sources of revenue for extremist operations in the Sahel. The same weak border controls that allow migrant smuggling networks to operate also permit the movement of weapons and combatants across the Mali-Niger-Burkina Faso tri-border area. Maritime insecurity in the Gulf of Guinea, meanwhile, diverts public revenue away from border security and social investment toward naval and insurance-related expenditure, revenue that coastal governments might otherwise have directed toward the governance improvements needed to reduce the appeal of both extremism and criminal recruitment.

The cumulative effect of these three threats is to diminish the legitimacy of state institutions across large parts of the continent, deter foreign investment, displace millions of people from their homes and livelihoods, and divert public resources away from health, education, and other development priorities. Each threat also exposes the limitations of security responses that rely exclusively on national militaries or external funding. Where regional ownership and information sharing have been prioritised, as in aspects of the maritime and trafficking responses discussed above, outcomes have proven more durable than in cases where military intervention alone was expected to resolve the underlying drivers of insecurity. The Sahel case is instructive in this respect: despite two decades of foreign-backed counter-terrorism assistance, the region has experienced an increase rather than a decrease in extremist violence, together with a wave of military takeovers that has further fragmented regional cooperation through the emergence of the Alliance of Sahel States. By contrast, the Yaoundé Code of Conduct in the Gulf of Guinea, although still constrained by weak governance capacity and donor dependence, has demonstrated that regionally coordinated information sharing and joint patrols can produce measurable reductions in maritime incidents over time, offering a partial, if incomplete, model of what regionally owned security cooperation can achieve when it is sustained over multiple years.

A further dimension of this interaction deserves attention: the way in which each threat compounds the fiscal pressures created by the others. Governments across the Sahel and Lake Chad Basin are simultaneously funding counter-insurgency operations, absorbing the economic losses associated with displaced populations, and losing tax revenue from disrupted agricultural and trade activity. Coastal governments in the Gulf of Guinea face parallel pressures, diverting scarce naval and diplomatic resources toward piracy suppression while absorbing reduced port revenue caused by the same insecurity. Trafficking and smuggling networks, for their part, extract resources from precisely the populations, young, economically active, and often already vulnerable to displacement or unemployment, whose productive contribution these same governments most need in order to fund the governance improvements that would ultimately reduce all three threats.

The three threats therefore do not simply coexist; they compete with one another for the same limited pool of public resources and, in doing so, make it more difficult for any single government to break the cycle through its own efforts alone.

9. Policy Implications

Several policy implications follow from this comparative assessment. First, African states and their regional bodies should prioritise the institutional capacity of cross-border security mechanisms, including judicial cooperation and shared intelligence platforms, over the acquisition of additional military hardware, since the evidence from the Sahel demonstrates that equipment and combat training alone have not translated into reduced violence, and may in some cases have reinforced the very propaganda narratives that sustain recruitment. Second, legal harmonisation among neighbouring states, particularly regarding the prosecution of trafficking, smuggling, and piracy-related offences, would close the jurisdictional gaps that criminal networks currently exploit with relative ease, allowing a trafficker or pirate financier to operate across several jurisdictions with limited fear of coordinated prosecution.

Third, governance investment in historically marginalised regions, of the kind identified by Piombo, Kallel, and Englebert (2024) as central to the pattern of jihadist recruitment in the Sahel, should be treated as a security priority rather than a purely developmental one, since the evidence reviewed here indicates that exclusion and grievance function as recruitment mechanisms for both extremist and criminal networks alike. Fourth, continued external support, whether military, financial, or technical, should be structured to strengthen rather than substitute for domestic and regional institutions, given the recurring finding across all three case studies that externally driven interventions produce gains that are difficult to sustain once outside attention shifts elsewhere. Fifth, regional bodies such as the successor arrangements to the Yaoundé Code of Conduct and the West Africa Coalition Against Trafficking in Persons and Smuggling of Migrants would benefit from dedicated, domestically generated financing mechanisms, so that their operations do not remain permanently dependent on donor funding whose availability can fluctuate with shifting international priorities.

Sixth, given the documented convergence between armed groups and trafficking networks in the recruitment and exploitation of children, child protection mechanisms should be explicitly integrated into counter-terrorism and anti-trafficking strategies rather than treated as a separate humanitarian concern, since the evidence suggests that these two categories of harm are, in the areas most affected, experienced by the same vulnerable populations simultaneously. Finally, research and monitoring capacity within African universities and research institutions should be strengthened so that policy responses can be informed by locally generated evidence rather than

relying primarily on assessments produced by external actors, whose priorities and assumptions may not always align with the lived realities of the communities most affected by these threats.

10. Limitations of the Study

This paper is subject to several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, as a qualitative, document-based assessment, it relies on the accuracy and completeness of the secondary sources it draws upon, and it does not independently verify the quantitative estimates reported by other researchers regarding, for example, the scale of forced labour profits or the number of trafficking victims from the region. Second, the paper's focus on three specific threats, while justified by their trans-national character and their prominence in the recent literature, does not capture the full range of security challenges facing the continent, including cyber-enabled financial crime, wildlife trafficking, and the illicit trade in small arms, each of which also displays trans-national characteristics and would repay further comparative analysis. Third, because the scholarly literature on these three threats has developed largely within separate disciplinary traditions, counter-terrorism studies, maritime security studies, and migration studies, the comparative framework applied in this paper necessarily involves some degree of interpretive synthesis across bodies of work that do not always use identical terminology or methodological standards. Future research employing primary data collection across all three threats within a single, consistent analytical framework would help to test and refine the comparative claims advanced here.

11. Conclusion

The evidence assessed in this paper demonstrates that trans-national security threats have become a defining feature of the African security landscape, and that terrorism in the Sahel and Lake Chad Basin, maritime piracy in the Gulf of Guinea, and human trafficking and migrant smuggling in West and North Africa each meet the definitional criteria of a genuinely trans-national threat: their actors operate across multiple sovereign states, the resources that sustain them move routinely across borders, and no single national government possesses the capacity or jurisdiction to resolve them independently. Beyond their individual consequences, which include the displacement of millions of people, the erosion of state legitimacy, and the diversion of scarce public resources away from development, the three threats are mutually reinforcing, drawing on shared corridors, shared vulnerabilities, and, in some documented cases, shared financing structures. Addressing these threats will therefore require African states to build the institutional capacity of regional mechanisms, harmonise legal frameworks across borders, and invest in the governance gaps that make communities vulnerable to extremism, criminality, and exploitation. Ultimately, the success of any security response on the continent should be measured not by the scale of external military or financial assistance it attracts, but by the extent to which African-led institutions, courts, and border agencies are able to exercise the collective ownership that threats of this nature demand.

Future scholarship would benefit from sustained, comparative, and primary-data-driven research that treats these threats not as separate silos of policy concern but as interacting elements of a single regional security challenge.

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