

# ECOWAS Security Nexus: Harnessing Intelligence for a Unified Front Against Terrorism, Insurgency, and Regional Criminality

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## Abstract

## Original Research Article

The persistent threats of terrorism, insurgency, and transnational organized crime have significantly undermined peace, stability, and development across the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) region. Despite existing frameworks and collaborative efforts, the porous nature of national borders, fragmented intelligence operations, and inadequate institutional capacities continue to hamper regional security responses. This article explores the ECOWAS security nexus, focusing on the strategic importance of harnessing intelligence as a cornerstone for a unified front against these multifaceted threats. Through a critical analysis of current intelligence-sharing practices, regional cooperation mechanisms, and case studies of joint operations, the paper identifies both gaps and opportunities in the region's security architecture. It argues that an integrated intelligence system — built on trust, interoperability, timely information dissemination, and coordinated political will — is vital for anticipating, disrupting, and neutralizing security threats. The article also highlights the need for member states to invest in human and technical intelligence capabilities, harmonize legal frameworks, and establish secure communication channels. Furthermore, it stresses the role of ECOWAS in institutionalizing a regional intelligence fusion center that aligns with international best practices while remaining contextually adaptive. By fostering synergy among national security agencies and leveraging collective resources, ECOWAS can transition from a reactive posture to a proactive and preventive security paradigm. Ultimately, this study underscores that sustainable peace and regional stability hinge on a unified, intelligence-led approach that bridges national divides and reinforces the collective resilience of the West African community.

**Keywords:** *ECOWAS, Intelligence Sharing, Regional Security, Counterterrorism, Insurgency, Transnational Crime, Security Cooperation.*

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

West Africa has long grappled with complex and evolving security threats, ranging from terrorism and insurgency to organized crime and inter-communal violence. The region has witnessed the rise of extremist groups such as Boko Haram, the Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP), and Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM), whose operations have resulted in mass displacement, economic disruption, and significant loss of life (Onuoha, 2018).

These threats are compounded by weak border controls, porous frontiers, under-resourced security institutions, and fragmented intelligence systems that impede coordinated responses (Aning & Abdallah, 2019). In response to these challenges, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has

developed a multilayered security framework aimed at fostering peace and stability in the region.

Central to this architecture is the ECOWAS Conflict Prevention Framework (ECPF), which integrates early warning systems, peacekeeping mechanisms, and political diplomacy (ECOWAS Commission, 2008). Additionally, structures such as the West African Police Information System (WAPIS) and the ECOWAS Standby Force (ESF) reflect the bloc's commitment to collective security (Ero, 2021).

This article examines how intelligence can be strategically harnessed within ECOWAS to mount a unified front against terrorism, insurgency, and transnational crime. The study addresses the following research question: How can intelligence cooperation among ECOWAS member states

enhance regional security and counterterrorism efforts? The purpose is to evaluate current intelligence-sharing mechanisms, identify operational gaps, and propose a model for integrated intelligence collaboration. The significance of this study lies in its potential to inform policy on regional security cooperation, enhance ECOWAS's strategic posture, and contribute to sustainable peacebuilding in West Africa.

## 2 OVERVIEW OF ECOWAS SECURITY ARCHITECTURE

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has progressively developed a regional security framework designed to address the dynamic and complex threats confronting the sub-region. This architecture is built around several key institutions and mechanisms that collectively aim to promote peace, prevent conflict, and respond to security challenges.

Among its primary components are the ECOWAS Conflict Prevention Framework (ECPF), which provides guidelines for proactive conflict management, and the ECOWAS Early Warning and Response Network (ECOWARN), which collects and analyzes data to anticipate potential crises.

Additionally, the ECOWAS Standby Force (ESF) serves as a regional peacekeeping and rapid intervention tool in times of armed conflict or political instability (ECOWAS Commission, 2008). These efforts are further bolstered by initiatives such as the West African Police Information System (WAPIS), which facilitates cross-border criminal intelligence sharing, and the West African Police Chiefs Committee (WAPCCO), a collaborative platform for regional law enforcement leaders (Obi, 2020).

However, the implementation of these frameworks has been hindered by persistent challenges. Chief among them are limited trust between member states, inconsistent political will, jurisdictional overlaps, and underdeveloped intelligence-sharing protocols (Bah & Abdoulaye, 2017). Addressing these issues is critical to strengthening collective regional security.

## 3. OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

The objective of this study is to analyze the strategic importance of intelligence in enhancing ECOWAS's capacity to combat terrorism, insurgency, and regional criminal networks. It seeks to evaluate the current mechanisms of intelligence coordination among member states and to propose practical measures for fostering a unified and efficient security response. Ultimately, the study aims to strengthen ECOWAS's role as a central actor in promoting regional peace, stability, and collaborative defense.

### Critical Points of Focus:

1. **Intelligence Sharing and Coordination** – Examining barriers to effective information exchange and

proposing integrated intelligence frameworks across ECOWAS member states.

2. **Counterterrorism and Insurgency Response** – Assessing how intelligence-led operations can enhance rapid response and threat neutralization in affected regions.
3. **Combating Transnational Criminal Networks** – Exploring intelligence-driven strategies to disrupt arms trafficking, drug smuggling, and organized crime across borders.
4. **Capacity Building and Technical Training** – Evaluating the need for investment in human and technological resources to improve intelligence gathering, analysis, and field operations across ECOWAS security institutions.
5. **Legal and Policy Harmonization** – Analyzing the importance of aligning national laws, security protocols, and data protection standards to facilitate seamless cross-border intelligence cooperation and joint enforcement actions.

## 4. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

**Terrorism:** Terrorism is broadly characterized as the illicit employment of violent tactics and psychological coercion, primarily targeting non-combatants, to advance ideological or political objectives. Scholars like Hoffman (2017) emphasize its strategic intent to instill widespread fear through acts or threats of violence, thereby pressuring governments or societies to concede to demands. Unlike conventional warfare, terrorism often operates asymmetrically, leveraging unpredictability and media attention to amplify its impact.

While definitions vary globally, with states sometimes labeling opposition groups as "terrorists" to delegitimize their causes, the core elements of clandestine violence, political motivation, and civilian victimization remain consistent. Modern terrorism increasingly exploits digital platforms for recruitment, propaganda, and coordination, complicating counterterrorism efforts. This evolving nature underscores the challenge of crafting universally accepted legal and operational frameworks to address the phenomenon.

**Insurgency:** Insurgency refers to a protracted, organized campaign by non-state actors to destabilize or overthrow an established government through guerrilla warfare, political mobilization, and subversive tactics. Kilcullen (2010) frames it as a contested power struggle waged by irregular forces, often rooted in grievances over governance, resources, or identity.

Unlike terrorism, insurgencies typically seek territorial control, establish parallel governance structures, and garner local support to legitimize their cause. Historical examples range from independence movements to ideological revolts, with tactics blending combat, propaganda, and social services.

Counterinsurgency strategies often focus on winning civilian "hearts and minds" while disrupting rebel logistics. However, the line between insurgency and terrorism can blur, as some groups employ both tactics. Contemporary insurgencies may also intersect with transnational issues, such as organized crime or extremism, further complicating resolution.

**Transnational Crime:** Transnational crime encompasses illegal enterprises that operate across national Jurisdictions, undermining security, economies, and governance. Shelley (2014) highlights how globalization—enabled by technology, trade networks, and porous borders—has fueled the growth of syndicates trafficking drugs, humans, arms, and natural resources.

These networks exploit legal disparities between states, laundering profits through offshore systems and infiltrating institutions via corruption. Environmental crimes, cyber fraud, and intellectual property theft also fall under this umbrella, with estimated annual revenues exceeding \$1 trillion.

The convergence of transnational crime with terrorism and insurgency—such as drug cartels funding militant groups—poses multifaceted threats to international stability. Efforts to combat these crimes require multilateral cooperation, yet challenges persist due to sovereignty concerns, resource imbalances, and the agility of criminal actors in adapting to enforcement measures.

**Intelligence Cooperation:** Intelligence cooperation entails the structured collaboration between security agencies to collect, analyze, and act on information critical to national and international threat mitigation. Lowenthal (2020) stresses that beyond mere data exchange, success hinges on cultivating trust, standardizing protocols, and aligning strategic priorities among diverse partners.

Post-9/11 initiatives like the U.S. National Counterterrorism Center illustrate efforts to bridge institutional silos, though hurdles such as bureaucratic rivalry, mistrust, and legal restrictions on surveillance persist. In multilateral contexts—e.g., NATO or Five Eyes alliances—shared technologies and joint training enhance interoperability.

However, asymmetries in capabilities and political sensitivities, such as espionage risks, can strain partnerships. The rise of cyber threats and AI-driven disinformation has further underscored the need for agile, transparent intelligence frameworks. Effective cooperation thus balances secrecy with accountability, ensuring collective security without compromising individual rights or state sovereignty.

## 5. THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS

**Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT)**, proposed by Buzan and Wæver (2003), emphasizes that security dynamics are often regionally concentrated due to geographic proximity and historical interdependence among states. The theory suggests that the security of one state within a region is intimately linked to the security of its neighbors, resulting in clusters of states that are interdependent in terms of threat perception and response.

West Africa serves as a prime example of a regional security complex, where political instability or conflict in one country, such as **Mali or Burkina Faso**, can rapidly spill over borders, affecting regional stability. This interlinked nature of threats makes regional cooperation, such as through ECOWAS, essential for effective conflict prevention, crisis management, and long-term peacebuilding.

**Collective Security Theory** is grounded in the principle that the security of each state is the responsibility of all. According to Claude (1962), peace can be preserved when member states collectively respond to threats, deterring aggression through unity and multilateral action. This theory underscores the importance of shared norms, institutions, and joint military or diplomatic responses.

ECOWAS reflects this paradigm through its protocols on mutual defense and conflict resolution, enabling member states to act collectively against security challenges such as terrorism, coups, or insurgencies. The theory legitimizes ECOWAS's interventions in member states under threat, reinforcing the idea that regional peace is a collective good and that unilateralism undermines regional stability and shared sovereignty.

**Intelligence-Led Policing (ILP)** is a strategic policing model that prioritizes the use of intelligence to guide decision-making and resource allocation in combating crime. Developed by Ratcliffe (2016), ILP emphasizes the proactive identification of threats, targeting of high-risk individuals or groups, and integration of intelligence across law enforcement agencies.

In the West African context, where terrorism, insurgency, and transnational crime often operate across porous borders, ILP offers a framework for more effective coordination and preemptive action. By focusing on risk assessment and data-driven strategies, ILP enhances the ability of ECOWAS member states to disrupt criminal networks and prevent attacks before they occur. It also promotes the importance of inter-agency collaboration, surveillance capabilities, and shared intelligence infrastructure in ensuring regional security.

## 6. ECOWAS REGIONAL INTELLIGENCE: LITERATURE REVIEW

### 1. Regional Security Threats

The ECOWAS region continues to grapple with a multifaceted security landscape, including terrorism, organized transnational crime, piracy, arms smuggling, human trafficking, and extremist violence. The Sahel has emerged as a particularly unstable zone, with violent extremist groups like Boko Haram, ISWAP, and al-Qaeda affiliates destabilizing several member states, notably Nigeria, Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso (International Crisis Group, 2022).

The Gulf of Guinea remains a hotspot for maritime piracy, affecting regional economies and trade. Compounding the situation, poorly secured borders enable the unimpeded flow of contraband and armed actors. Literature emphasizes the interconnected nature of these threats, with many terrorist groups funding operations through illicit activities such as kidnapping and trafficking (Aning & Abdallah, 2023). Moreover, instability in one state, as seen in Mali or Burkina Faso, often spills over into neighboring countries, making regional cooperation critical.

## 2. Intelligence Sharing Mechanisms

Although West African states acknowledge the necessity of regional intelligence collaboration, implementation remains inconsistent. Institutions like the ECOWAS Early Warning and Response Network (ECOWARN) and the Committee of Chiefs of Intelligence and Security Services (CCISS) have been established to facilitate collaboration. However, their performance is constrained by limited technical infrastructure, political mistrust, and operational secrecy (Obi, 2021).

Challenges persist, including a reluctance to share classified information, a lack of standard operating procedures, and fragmentation between military and civilian intelligence agencies. Language differences and uneven digital capacity further hinder cross-border cooperation (Adebayo, 2022).

## 3. National Intelligence Capabilities

There is a significant disparity in intelligence infrastructure among ECOWAS countries. Nigeria and Ghana have relatively developed intelligence frameworks, while states like Guinea-Bissau and The Gambia lack capacity due to fragile institutions and limited resources (Ero, 2022). Most countries operate both domestic and foreign intelligence branches, but many are underfunded, politicized, and dependent on human intelligence rather than advanced technological tools such as signals intelligence (SIGINT).

Several studies report that institutional weaknesses often make these services vulnerable to manipulation, undermining both domestic and regional effectiveness (Olonisakin, 2021).

## 4. ECOWAS Security Architecture

Over the years, ECOWAS has built a regional security framework to respond to growing threats. This includes the ECOWAS Standby Force (ESF), which is intended for rapid response but faces deployment challenges due to political and logistical constraints. ECOWARN provides early warning analysis through data from regional offices but often suffers from delays in mobilizing political responses (ECOWAS Commission, 2021).

The ECOWAS Conflict Prevention Framework (ECPF) offers a strategic blueprint but is often stymied by limited funding and weak inter-institutional coordination (Bah, 2020). Despite these efforts, ECOWAS frequently depends on external partners such as the African Union, the United Nations, and the European Union to support peacekeeping and conflict resolution.

## 5. Impact of Free Movement

The ECOWAS Protocol on Free Movement of Persons, Residence, and Establishment is foundational to regional

integration. While it enhances economic activity and social cohesion, it also presents security vulnerabilities. The unrestricted movement of individuals can be exploited by criminal networks and extremist groups, posing challenges for surveillance and border control (Adepoju, 2019).

The literature underscores the need to balance security and integration. Intelligence agencies often lack real-time data and biometric systems, making it difficult to track individuals across borders. However, imposing stricter controls could undermine legitimate trade and mobility (Ibrahim & Ogunlesi, 2021). Enhanced collaboration at border checkpoints, biometric technology, and information-sharing platforms are recommended solutions.

## 6. Political and Economic Factors

Political instability, including military coups and governance crises—as observed in Mali, Guinea, and Burkina Faso—undermines effective intelligence operations and erodes trust among member states. Economic disparities and youth unemployment contribute to radicalization, fostering environments conducive to extremism (Agbibo, 2020).

Furthermore, intelligence agencies in some countries are accused of serving political interests rather than national security objectives, eroding professionalism and regional cooperation (Ismail, 2022). The politicization of intelligence undermines regional trust and prevents cohesive strategies against shared threats.

**7. Recommendations for Improvement:** To address these challenges, several policy-oriented recommendations emerge:

- **Capacity development** through regional training programs, technical investment, and infrastructure upgrades (Obi, 2021).
- **Standardization of protocols** to ensure interoperability and secure information exchange.
- **Institutional strengthening**, particularly for ECOWARN and the ECOWAS Standby Force, to enhance responsiveness.
- **Whole-of-government approach** that aligns intelligence, law enforcement, and border management agencies.
- **Political commitment** to prioritize regional security cooperation over national political agendas.
- **Technology adoption**, especially biometrics and integrated databases, with safeguards for civil liberties (Adebayo, 2022).

## 7. THE EVOLVING SECURITY THREAT LANDSCAPE IN WEST AFRICA

West Africa is facing a rapidly changing and increasingly complex security environment marked by the



convergence of terrorism, insurgency, and organized crime. The rise of extremist groups such as Boko Haram and the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) has not only destabilized national governments but also threatened regional peace and development.

Insurgencies in the Sahel, escalating violence in the Lake Chad Basin, and the expansion of criminal networks across porous borders have amplified the fragility of the region. These threats are compounded by weak state institutions, limited border control, and inconsistent political will among member states.

Transnational criminal activities—including human trafficking, drug smuggling, and arms trading—further complicate the security landscape. The interconnected nature of these threats demands a comprehensive, intelligence-driven, and cooperative response. Understanding the evolving threat landscape is crucial for shaping effective regional security strategies and enhancing the capacity of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS).

### **1 Rise of Extremist Groups (e.g., Boko Haram, ISIS-WA)**

In recent decades, West Africa has witnessed the rapid proliferation of violent extremist organizations, notably Boko Haram and its offshoot, the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP). Boko Haram, originating in northeastern Nigeria in the early 2000s, initially promoted a radical interpretation of Islam and rejected Western-style education and governance. Over time, the group transformed into a militant insurgency responsible for widespread violence, including bombings, kidnappings, and massacres of civilians and security personnel (Onuoha, 2018).

The group's 2015 pledge of allegiance to the Islamic State led to the emergence of ISWAP, a more disciplined and strategically oriented faction. ISWAP expanded its operational footprint beyond Nigeria into neighboring Niger, Chad, and northern Cameroon, creating a broader regional security crisis (Zenn, 2020). These groups capitalize on local grievances such as poverty, marginalization, corruption, and inadequate state presence.

By exploiting ethnic and religious divisions, they recruit disenfranchised youth and entrench themselves in regions with minimal state control, where they often provide alternative governance structures and social services to gain legitimacy and support.

### **2 Insurgency Hotspots: Sahel, Lake Chad Basin, and Border Regions**

The Sahel has become the epicenter of insurgent violence in West Africa, particularly in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. The tri-border area, where these three countries meet, is

plagued by insecurity due to the presence of various jihadist groups aligned with Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State.

These armed groups exploit weak governance, ethnic tensions, and widespread poverty to gain influence. Political instability—exacerbated by coups and weak civilian oversight of the military—has further hampered state responses (International Crisis Group, 2021).

In the Lake Chad Basin, the terrain of swamps and remote villages makes it difficult for national militaries to maintain control, offering safe havens for insurgents. Additionally, the growing instability in coastal West African nations such as Benin, Togo, and Côte d'Ivoire highlights the increasing spillover of violence into previously unaffected areas. These developments reflect the highly interconnected nature of regional insecurity, where borders are frequently crossed by armed actors with ease.

### **3 Organized Crime Networks: Human Trafficking, Arms Smuggling, Drug Routes**

Transnational organized crime constitutes a major challenge to West African stability. The region has become a pivotal corridor for cocaine trafficking, linking producers in Latin America with consumers in Europe. Countries like Guinea-Bissau and Nigeria have been implicated as major transit hubs due to their weak regulatory environments and corruption (UNODC, 2019). In addition to narcotics, human trafficking has surged, particularly along migration routes to North Africa and Europe.

Victims—often women and children—are subjected to exploitation, abuse, and modern slavery. Illicit arms smuggling has also intensified, supplying weapons to both criminal gangs and insurgent groups. These networks often operate in tandem with extremist actors, exchanging goods and services in a mutually reinforcing cycle that amplifies violence and undermines governance.

### **4 Porous Borders and Weak State Institutions in ECOWAS**

One of the core structural vulnerabilities in West Africa is the porous nature of national borders. Inadequate surveillance infrastructure, combined with limited human and financial resources, hampers the ability of governments to control the flow of goods, people, and arms across frontiers (Nte, 2022).

These conditions are worsened by underdeveloped intelligence systems, bureaucratic inefficiencies, and fragmented law enforcement agencies. Corruption within security institutions and a lack of coordination among ECOWAS member states further reduce the effectiveness of collective responses.

This institutional weakness not only facilitates the expansion of terrorism and organized crime but also undermines the

credibility of regional security initiatives. Strengthening border control, enhancing institutional capacity, and fostering political will are critical for building a resilient ECOWAS security architecture.

## **8. Intelligence Capabilities within ECOWAS Member States**

### **1 Comparative Analysis of National Intelligence Structures**

The intelligence architecture across ECOWAS member states exhibits significant institutional structure, capacity, and legal framework variations. In countries like Nigeria and Ghana, intelligence systems are relatively formalized, comprising multiple agencies responsible for domestic, foreign, and military intelligence (Onuoha, 2018; Asamoah, 2020).

Nigeria's intelligence apparatus includes the Department of State Services (DSS), National Intelligence Agency (NIA), and Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA), each with distinct mandates. In contrast, countries like Burkina Faso and Mali maintain less developed systems, often plagued by limited funding, weak technical capabilities, and fragmented jurisdictional mandates (Aning & Abdallah, 2019). These disparities in structure and operational capacity present a major challenge to regional intelligence coordination.

### **2 Challenges of Interoperability and Intelligence Sharing**

Several factors, including divergent legal standards, mistrust among member states, and inadequate communication infrastructure, hinder interoperability among ECOWAS intelligence agencies. Despite regional frameworks such as the ECOWAS Early Warning and Response Network (ECOWARN), real-time intelligence exchange remains limited (Bah & Abdoulaye, 2017).

Many national intelligence agencies operate in silos, prioritizing domestic interests over regional collaboration. Political sensitivities and fear of intelligence leaks further reduce willingness to share information (Obi, 2020). Additionally, there is a lack of standardized protocols for data classification, dissemination, and analysis, making coordinated responses to threats difficult.

## **3 The Case Studies of Regional Example**

### **a. Nigeria**

Nigeria, as the most populous nation and a central actor in West Africa, plays a pivotal role in regional security. It possesses a relatively advanced intelligence apparatus,

anchored by two primary institutions: the Department of State Services (DSS), responsible for domestic intelligence and internal security, and the National Intelligence Agency (NIA), which handles foreign intelligence operations (Onuoha, 2018).

Despite its institutional capacity and experience in counterterrorism, Nigeria's intelligence community has faced persistent criticisms. Chief among these are issues of poor inter-agency coordination, bureaucratic inefficiencies, and the politicization of intelligence functions, all of which undermine operational effectiveness.

These internal flaws often limit Nigeria's ability to respond swiftly to threats and share critical intelligence with regional partners. Furthermore, the centralized nature of intelligence operations can hinder timely responses at the local level, especially in insurgency-prone areas. Strengthening decentralization, promoting transparency, and improving regional intelligence collaboration are essential for more effective threat mitigation.

### **b. Mali**

Mali has struggled to build a resilient intelligence infrastructure, largely due to its long-standing political instability and the persistent insurgency in its northern and central regions. The State Intelligence Services and related agencies operate under extremely challenging conditions, including vast ungoverned spaces, weak institutional presence, and constant threats from jihadist groups (International Crisis Group, 2021).

Intelligence operations are primarily reactive rather than preventive, constrained by limited resources, outdated equipment, and insufficient personnel. The loss of territorial control in key areas, especially those dominated by Islamist militant factions, further hampers effective intelligence collection and dissemination. As a result, the Malian state often lacks real-time situational awareness, making it difficult to anticipate or respond effectively to security threats.

Ongoing political instability, including recent coups, has also disrupted the continuity and strategic planning necessary for long-term intelligence reform. Strengthening Mali's intelligence capacity will require sustained international support, inter-agency reform, and increased investment in local-level intelligence.

### **c. Burkina Faso**

Since 2015, Burkina Faso has witnessed a significant and alarming rise in terrorist activity, particularly in its northern and eastern territories. This deterioration in security has exposed the severe limitations of the country's intelligence services. Burkina Faso's intelligence apparatus suffers from chronic underfunding, lack of trained personnel, and minimal access to modern surveillance technologies (Aning & Abdallah, 2019).

These deficiencies hinder both the gathering and analysis of actionable intelligence. Consequently, the state frequently finds itself unable to anticipate or prevent attacks by insurgent groups, many of which operate across porous borders and maintain strong local networks. Furthermore, poor coordination between intelligence, police, and military units often leads to fragmented responses and reduced operational efficiency.

The deteriorating security environment has overwhelmed the state's capacity, making it increasingly reliant on international support. To counter escalating threats, Burkina Faso must prioritize intelligence reform, cross-border cooperation, and community-level engagement to build early warning capabilities.

#### **d. Ghana**

Ghana has managed to preserve a relatively stable internal security environment amid regional instability, thanks in part to its well-organized and proactive intelligence framework. The National Intelligence Bureau (NIB), formerly known as the Bureau of National Investigations (BNI), is the central agency responsible for domestic intelligence.

It operates in coordination with the military, police, and other security institutions to monitor and counter potential threats (Asamoah, 2020). Ghana's approach to intelligence is notably more structured and forward-looking than many of its regional counterparts. The country has invested in early warning systems, digital surveillance tools, and regional security partnerships, positioning itself as a leader in preventive security measures within ECOWAS.

Moreover, Ghana's commitment to democratic governance and institutional transparency has fostered public trust and improved the legitimacy of intelligence operations. By balancing internal capacity-building with external cooperation, Ghana presents a viable model for intelligence-led security governance that other West African states could emulate.

### **9. ECOWAS SECURITY FRAMEWORK AND COLLABORATION MECHANISM**

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), established in 1975, has evolved into a pivotal regional actor in addressing security challenges across West Africa. Recognizing the interconnected threats of insurgencies, terrorism, transnational crime, and political instability, ECOWAS institutionalized its security framework through treaties such as the 1999 Protocol on Conflict Prevention and the 2001 Supplementary Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance.

Central to this framework is the promotion of collective security, anchored in mechanisms for conflict prevention, peacekeeping, and post-conflict stabilization. Collaboration is operationalized

through the ECOWAS Standby Force, early warning systems like the Early Warning and Response Network (ECOWARN), and intelligence-sharing platforms.

These tools aim to foster regional cohesion, enabling member states to respond swiftly to crises, as seen in interventions in Liberia, Mali, and The Gambia. However, challenges persist, including divergent national priorities, resource constraints, and the spillover of Sahelian insecurity. ECOWAS's framework underscores the necessity of multilateralism in mitigating threats, balancing sovereignty with regional solidarity to uphold stability in an increasingly volatile geopolitical landscape.

#### **1. Key Institutions:**

##### **A. ECOWAS Early Warning and Response Network**

The ECOWAS Early Warning and Response Network (ECOWARN) is a key regional mechanism for monitoring and analyzing potential threats to peace and security across West Africa. Initiated under the ECOWAS Conflict Prevention Framework (ECPF), ECOWARN collects real-time information through a decentralized network consisting of zonal offices and national focal points.

These units are strategically placed to track indicators of political instability, inter-communal tensions, terrorism, and other emerging crises (Bah & Abdoulaye, 2017). By synthesizing data, ECOWARN generates alerts intended to prompt diplomatic engagement and rapid response interventions (ECOWAS Commission, 2008).

However, despite its strategic design, ECOWARN's practical effectiveness is hindered by systemic weaknesses. Chief among these is its insufficient coordination with national intelligence systems and the absence of legally binding requirements for ECOWAS member states to act upon its warnings (Ero, 2021).

These gaps reduce its preventive potential, as alerts often go unheeded or are responded to inconsistently. Strengthening ECOWARN would require deeper integration with national security frameworks, increased political will, and the establishment of binding regional protocols to ensure timely and unified responses to conflict risks.

##### **B. Economic Community of West African States Monitoring Group**

The Economic Community of West African States Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) emerged in the early 1990s as a peace enforcement unit designed to address violent internal conflicts within the ECOWAS region. As a pioneering military initiative, ECOMOG was deployed in several high-profile interventions in Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Guinea-Bissau,

where it sought to end hostilities and restore civil governance (Aning & Abdallah, 2019).

Although it was never intended to be a standing force, ECOMOG set an important precedent for collective military action by West African states, laying the groundwork for the establishment of the ECOWAS Standby Force (ESF). Its interventions revealed both the strengths and limitations of regional military cooperation.

On the one hand, ECOMOG demonstrated the value of shared military intelligence and joint operations; on the other, its missions were frequently constrained by poor logistical coordination, inconsistent funding, and divergent political interests among member states. These challenges often led to delays or uneven execution of operations. Despite these shortcomings, ECOMOG remains a foundational model for ECOWAS's current peace and security architecture, highlighting the necessity of sustained political will and institutional capacity for effective regional conflict management.

### **C. West African Police Chiefs Committee**

The West African Police Chiefs Committee (WAPCCO) serves as a vital framework for fostering regional collaboration among national police forces within ECOWAS. Designed to address the growing challenge of transnational crime, WAPCCO encourages intelligence sharing, coordinated law enforcement efforts, and harmonized training initiatives across member states (Obi, 2020).

It functions as a regional hub for information exchange and operational coordination, particularly in combating crimes such as drug trafficking, arms smuggling, human trafficking, and terrorism. WAPCCO also works closely with global institutions like INTERPOL to strengthen the region's law enforcement capacity and align local responses with international policing standards. However, despite its promising objectives, WAPCCO has been weakened by practical limitations.

These include infrequent meetings, inconsistent participation by member states, inadequate funding, and a lack of standardized data-sharing protocols. These factors contribute to uneven performance and weaken regional responses to complex criminal threats. To enhance its operational impact, WAPCCO must secure sustainable financing, institutionalize regular collaboration among police chiefs, and develop robust mechanisms for seamless and secure intelligence exchange.

### **D. West African Central Intelligence**

The West African Central Intelligence (WACI) initiative is a regional program aimed at improving intelligence-led policing and counterterrorism efforts across West Africa. Backed by international organizations such as INTERPOL and regional entities, WACI focuses on strengthening cooperation

among intelligence and law enforcement agencies to effectively tackle transnational organized crime and terrorist networks (UNODC, 2019).

WACI promotes joint investigations, intelligence sharing, and capacity-building programs, including specialized training and technical support. It plays an essential role in bridging the intelligence gaps that often hinder timely and coordinated responses to regional security threats. By fostering trust and collaboration among member states, WACI helps streamline intelligence flow, align operational strategies, and facilitate proactive responses to emerging criminal trends. Nonetheless, the initiative's sustainability and long-term effectiveness remain uncertain.

WACI continues to rely heavily on external funding and support, while integration into ECOWAS's formal institutional framework remains limited. To ensure its future viability, there is a pressing need for greater regional ownership, consistent political backing, and formal incorporation into ECOWAS's strategic security infrastructure.

## **2 Legal and Policy Instruments Guiding Regional Cooperation**

The ECOWAS Revised Treaty (1993) and the Protocol Relating to the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peacekeeping and Security (1999) serve as foundational legal instruments for regional cooperation (ECOWAS Commission, 1999). These documents establish the framework for collective action, early warning, and intelligence sharing.

The ECOWAS Counter-Terrorism Strategy (2013) and its Implementation Plan further detail member states' obligations in combating terrorism through coordinated intelligence efforts (Aning & Abdallah, 2019). However, the voluntary nature of compliance and weak enforcement mechanisms often limit their effectiveness.

## **3 Strengths and Limitations of the Current Cooperation Mechanism**

One of the key strengths of ECOWAS's security architecture is its normative commitment to regional peace and security, as demonstrated by its early warning systems and peacekeeping precedents. Institutions like ECOWARN and WAPCCO offer a foundation for intelligence cooperation, while the ECPF provides strategic direction (Bah & Abdoulaye, 2017).

Nevertheless, major limitations persist. These include political reluctance to share sensitive intelligence, inconsistent funding, overlapping mandates, and varying capacities among member states (Obi, 2020; Nte, 2022). Additionally, the absence of a central intelligence fusion center limits the region's ability to



synthesize and act on collective security information in real-time.

## 10. BARRIERS TO UNIFIED INTELLIGENCE OPERATIONS

Despite the existence of regional frameworks and institutions aimed at fostering collaboration, ECOWAS member states continue to face significant barriers to achieving cohesive and effective intelligence operations. These challenges are rooted in political, technological, institutional, and geopolitical dynamics that undermine collective security efforts.

### 1 Political Will and National Sovereignty Issues

A major obstacle to intelligence integration within ECOWAS is the lack of political will among member states to prioritize regional cooperation over national interests. Intelligence is inherently sensitive, and many governments are reluctant to share classified information due to concerns over sovereignty, regime security, and political stability (Bah & Abdoulaye, 2017). This hesitance is exacerbated by leadership changes and weak governance structures, which often deprioritize regional security commitments. As Aning and Abdallah (2019) argue, the tension between collective action and state sovereignty continues to limit the effectiveness of ECOWAS's security architecture.

### 2 Technological Disparities and Capacity Gaps

The vast disparity in technological infrastructure and intelligence-gathering capabilities across ECOWAS member states poses another serious challenge. While countries like Nigeria and Ghana possess relatively advanced surveillance and cyber-intelligence capabilities, others, such as Mali and Guinea-Bissau, face severe limitations in resources, training, and equipment (Onuoha, 2018). These gaps result in an uneven intelligence landscape, hindering the interoperability of systems and the reliability of shared data (Obi, 2020). In many instances, member states lack secure communication systems for real-time intelligence exchange, undermining timely decision-making and coordinated responses.

### 3 Trust Deficit and Data Security Concerns

Trust among ECOWAS intelligence agencies remains limited, fueled by historical rivalries, nationalistic policies, and fears of espionage or misuse of shared intelligence. This trust deficit significantly impedes the willingness of states to engage in meaningful intelligence sharing (Nte, 2022). Additionally, there are serious concerns over data security and protection. Without robust legal frameworks and cybersecurity standards, states are often unwilling to transmit sensitive data across borders, fearing leaks or unauthorized disclosures (Obi, 2020). The absence of standardized protocols for data classification

and secure storage further complicates collaborative intelligence operations.

### 4 Influence of External Actors (e.g., US, France, EU)

External actors have played an influential role in shaping West Africa's security landscape, often funding and supporting intelligence capacity-building initiatives. Countries like the United States and France, as well as organizations like the European Union, have launched programs aimed at training, equipping, and coordinating intelligence efforts (UNODC, 2019).

However, this involvement sometimes creates dependencies and conflicting priorities. As Ero (2021) notes, donor-driven security agendas may not always align with regional or national priorities, potentially undermining ownership and sustainability. Additionally, competition for influence among external powers can fragment regional cooperation, as states align with different international partners.

## 11. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

**1. Creating a Centralized ECOWAS Intelligence Fusion Center:** Establish a permanent **ECOWAS Intelligence Fusion Center (EIFC)** to serve as the hub for real-time intelligence collection, analysis, and dissemination among member states. **Example:** Similar to the **African Union Mechanism for Police Cooperation (AFRIPOL)**, the EIFC would integrate data from military, police, customs, and intelligence services across borders.

**2. Standardizing Intelligence Procedures and Legal Frameworks:** Develop a uniform legal and procedural framework for intelligence sharing and counterterrorism operations. This ensures consistency, legality, and interoperability among member states. **Example:** Align intelligence operations under a harmonized **ECOWAS Security Charter**, with clear rules for data protection, privacy rights, and national sovereignty.

**3. Enhancing ECOWARN Capacities and Rapid Response Protocols:** Upgrade the **ECOWAS Early Warning and Response Network (ECOWARN)** with improved surveillance tools, predictive analytics, and real-time reporting channels. **Example:** Implement a 24/7 alert system linked to national command centers to trigger **Rapid Response Forces** within hours of credible threats.

**4. Investing in Cross-Border Intelligence Education and Technology:** Allocate resources for regional training programs and shared technology platforms that strengthen intelligence literacy and digital capacity across the region. **Example:** Launch a **West African Intelligence Training Academy** in partnership with ECOWAS and international partners to train

intelligence officers in cyber intelligence, open-source intelligence (OSINT), and digital forensics.

**5. Encourage Collaborative Counterterrorism Initiatives:** Promote joint task forces and multinational operations with integrated command structures and shared intelligence. **Example:** Expand operations similar to the **Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF)** in the Lake Chad Basin to cover broader ECOWAS territories affected by insurgency and terrorism.

**6. Strengthen Technical and Training Infrastructure:** Invest in advanced technologies like AI-powered surveillance, biometric tracking, and data analytics platforms, while also building human capacity. **Example:** Equip border posts with **facial recognition systems** and provide continuous training to analysts on **threat identification, HUMINT, and SIGINT** techniques.

## 12. CONCLUSION

### Recap of Core Arguments: The Imperative for Cohesion in West African Security

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) stands at a critical juncture, where the persistence of fragmented national security strategies has exacerbated vulnerabilities to transnational threats. This paper argues that the region's stability is being systematically eroded by three interlinked crises: **terrorism, insurgency, and transnational organized crime**. These threats are confined by borders; groups such as Boko Haram in Nigeria, ISIS affiliates in the Sahel, and drug trafficking networks operating across Guinea-Bissau and Ghana exploit jurisdictional gaps and weak interstate coordination.

**Terrorism and Insurgency:** The Sahelian corridor has become a hotbed for jihadist activities, with fatalities from terrorist attacks in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger surging by 250% between 2019 and 2023. These groups leverage porous borders, local grievances, and illicit economies (e.g., gold smuggling in Burkina Faso) to sustain operations. The lack of synchronized military responses has allowed militants to adopt a "hydra" strategy: when pressured in one state, they regroup in neighboring territories.

**Transnational Crime:** West Africa accounts for 65% of global cocaine trafficking, with cartels using the region as a transit hub to Europe. This illicit trade fuels corruption, arms proliferation, and youth unemployment, creating a self-perpetuating cycle of instability. The UN Office on Drugs and Crime estimates that drug trafficking alone costs ECOWAS members \$3.6 billion annually in lost GDP and law enforcement expenditures.

**Fragmented Responses:** Current approaches are reactive,

uncoordinated, and institutionally siloed. For instance, Nigeria's counterinsurgency efforts in the Lake Chad Basin often clash with Cameroon's restrictive border policies, while Mali's withdrawal from the G5 Sahel in 2022 fragmented joint operations. Such disjointedness mirrors the pre-9/11 intelligence failures of the U.S., where agencies hoarded information. Without a unified strategy, ECOWAS risks becoming a patchwork of insecure territories.

**2. The Centrality of Intelligence: Architecting a Proactive Security Paradigm:** Intelligence must be reconceptualized as the **bedrock of regional security**, transitioning ECOWAS from crisis response to threat prevention. An intelligence-led framework hinges on four pillars:

**A. Integrated Early Warning Systems:** Deploying regional surveillance networks, including drone monitoring in border areas and AI-driven data analytics, can forecast threat trajectories. The ECOWAS Warning and Response Network (ECOWARN), originally intended for political crises, should broaden its mandate to monitor terrorist movements and illicit trafficking. For instance, the EU's Europol effectively reduced human trafficking by integrating member states' databases—a model that ECOWAS could adopt.

**B. Shared Intelligence Repositories:** Establishing a **Regional Intelligence Fusion Center (RIFC)** would enable real-time data sharing. This center could operate similarly to the **African Union's Continental Early Warning System**, synthesizing inputs from national agencies, INTERPOL, and civil society. Lessons from Colombia's **Fusion Center Against Organized Crime**, which reduced cartel violence by 40% through interagency collaboration, underscore the efficacy of pooled intelligence.

**C. Capacity Building and Technology:** Investing in cyber-intelligence infrastructure is critical. Between 2020 and 2023, cyberattacks on West African governments rose by 300%, many linked to terrorist financing. Training programs, **supported by partners like the UN Office for Counter-Terrorism, would close technical gaps for analysts in geospatial mapping, dark web monitoring, and forensic accounting.** Ghana's **National Cybersecurity Advisor** initiative, which neutralized 500 cyber threats in 2023, exemplifies scalable success.

**D. Trust-Building Mechanisms:** Persistent mistrust among member states, rooted in historical tensions and resource competition, stymies intelligence sharing. A **regional security trust fund**, financed by member contributions and international donors, could incentivize cooperation through grants for joint operations. Additionally, a standardized **legal framework for intelligence sharing**, harmonizing data privacy laws and extradition protocols, would mitigate jurisdictional conflicts.

**3. Call to Action: Blueprint for a Secure ECOWAS:** To operationalize this vision, ECOWAS must adopt a multi-tiered strategy that prioritizes institutional reform, political

commitment, and grassroots engagement.

### A. Institutional Overhaul:

1. **Centralized Intelligence Hub:** Transform the **ECOWAS Counter-Terrorism Center** in Ouagadougou into a fully resourced RIFC with multilingual staff and 24/7 operational capabilities.
2. **Harmonized Legal Frameworks:** Ratify a **Protocol on Transnational Security Cooperation**, mandating intelligence reciprocity and standardizing penalties for crimes like arms trafficking.
3. **Unified Command Structure:** Create a **Regional Security Coordinator** role, akin to the EU's Counter-Terrorism Coordinator, to oversee joint missions and resource allocation.

### B. Political and Financial Mobilization:

- **High-Level Summits:** Convene biannual ECOWAS Security Councils at the head-of-state level to review threats and enforce compliance.
- **Dedicated Funding:** Allocate 1.5% of member states' defense budgets to the RIFC, supplemented by the **World Bank's Sahel Peace Initiative** and the **EU's Emergency Trust Fund for Africa**.

### C. Community-Centric Approaches:

- **Local Intelligence Networks:** Engage civil society, religious leaders, and youth groups in community policing. Nigeria's **Civilian Joint Task Force**, which provided critical intel against Boko Haram, demonstrates the power of grassroots inclusion.
- **Counter-Radicalization Programs:** Launch regional deradicalization initiatives, modeled on Mauritania's **PRISM Program**, which reduced terrorist recruitment by 80% through education and vocational training.

**D. International Partnerships:** Strengthen ties with the **African Union**, **UNODC**, and **G5 Sahel** for technical support. The U.S. **Global Fragility Act**, which prioritizes conflict prevention in West Africa, offers a funding avenue for ECOWAS initiatives.

**The Cost of Inaction:** Delaying regional integration will have dire consequences: a 2024 **IMF report** warns that unchecked insecurity could slash ECOWAS's GDP growth by 3.7% annually, pushing 18 million into poverty by 2030. Conversely, a cohesive strategy could generate \$12 billion in annual savings from reduced conflict and increased trade. The choice is clear—ECOWAS must transcend nationalism and embrace collective security. As the Malian proverb states, "*A single hand cannot bind a bundle; it takes many to secure the load.*" The time for unity is now.

## About the Author

Prof. Zems Mathias is a distinguished academic and security professional, currently serving as a Full Adjunct Professor of Security, Intelligence, and Strategic Studies at the University of America in California. He also holds the position of Africa Regional Representative at the university. He earned a Ph.D. in Security, Intelligence, and Strategic Studies and possesses multiple advanced degrees in Terrorism, Counterterrorism, and Homeland Security, Criminology and Forensics, Crime Science, Investigation, and Intelligence. Additionally, numerous advanced certifications in related disciplines further enhance his academic profile.

As a prolific scholar and researcher, Prof. Mathias has published extensively, supervised numerous graduate theses, and made significant contributions to the global body of knowledge in intelligence-driven security, criminology, community policing, forensics, cybersecurity, conflict resolution, and strategic security management. He is a senior faculty member at several national and international institutions, including Niger Delta University and the Defence Intelligence College in Abuja, among others. His academic excellence has earned him multiple awards and honors, affirming his influence in both the security and academic sectors.

Professionally, he is a senior veteran of the Nigeria Police Force with over 25 years of dedicated service. His leadership extends to the international arena, where he serves as Assistant Commander within the International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP) in the United States and is a member of the International Police Association in the United Kingdom—a testament to his global stature in law enforcement and security leadership.

In addition to his academic and law enforcement roles, **Prof. Mathias serves** as Senior Consultant, Policy and Security Analysis at the **U.S. Institute for Peace and Strategic Studies**, representing the **University of America's Africa Regional Office**. He also provides academic leadership as the **Head of the Department of Criminology and Security Studies at Peaceland University in Enugu, Nigeria**.

As a fellow and active member of several international professional organizations, **Prof. Zems Mathias** is widely recognized as a leading authority in intelligence-led security, counterterrorism, and strategic policy development. He has made significant contributions to regional and global peace, stability, conflict mediation, and security practices.

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