

# Challenges to Peace and Security in West Africa: The Role of ECOWAS

Johan Tejpar and Adriana Lins de Albuquerque

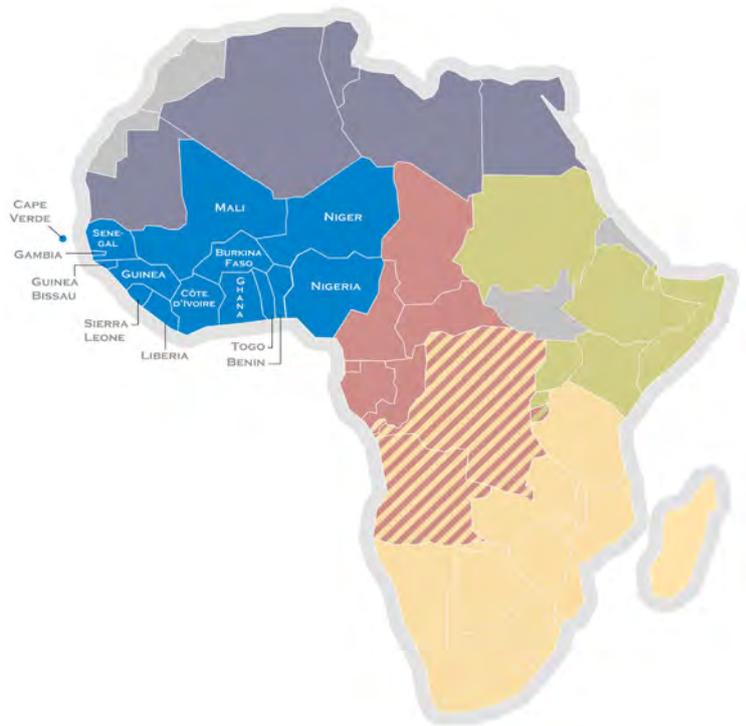
**Armed conflict, unconstitutional changes in power and transnational crime are some of the most urgent factors contributing to state and human insecurity in West Africa. The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) is the region's principal organisation for security cooperation, and its contribution to the African Peace and Security Architecture. This brief analyses the main challenges to peace and security in West Africa in the past five years and how ECOWAS has responded to these.**

With a projected growth rate of 7.4 per cent in 2014, West Africa is the fastest growing economic region on the continent. Yet over the past five years, West Africa has also seen armed conflicts, leaders seizing power through unconstitutional means, the Ebola pandemic and piracy in the Gulf of Guinea. Overall, national security sector institutions remain weak, with parts of the region functioning as hubs for transnational crime, particularly drug trafficking. Given these security challenges, it is fortunate that in ECOWAS<sup>1</sup>, West Africa also has by far the most advanced regional economic community on the continent to tackle these hurdles transnationally.

## ECOWAS's peace and security structures

When it was created 40 years ago, ECOWAS was primarily an economic organisation without a security mandate. Realising that conflict and insecurity were major obstacles to economic development, ECOWAS developed its main conflict prevention and management frameworks and tools, namely the *Protocol Relating to the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peacekeeping and Security* (1999) and the *Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance* (2001). Together they formed the basis for the *ECOWAS Conflict and Prevention Framework* (2008). Whereas the former focuses mostly on conflict management, the latter emphasises conflict prevention. Capabilities include the Mediation and Security Council, under which the Council of the Wise, the ECOWAS Standby Force (ESF) and the Defence and Security Commission reside. Within the ECOWAS Commission, the Office of the Commissioner for Political Affairs, Peace and Security and its three directorates (Political Affairs, Early Warning, and Peacekeeping and Regional Security) are responsible for issues related to peace and security.

<sup>1</sup>Benin, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, the Gambia, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Senegal and Togo are member states. Mauritania left ECOWAS in 2002, and Chad obtained observer status in 2011.



## ECOWAS's responses to the main challenges to peace and security

In an effort to analyse the role of ECOWAS in addressing challenges to peace and security, the following sections offer an overview of the organisation's responses to the main sources of insecurity in West Africa over the past five years.

- **Armed conflict**

ECOWAS as an institution has been notably absent militarily in the two major armed conflicts ravaging the region in the last five years, namely the crisis in Mali and the Boko Haram insurgency. That said, many ECOWAS member states have been militarily active in the African-led mission to Mali, AFISMA.



The ECOWAS response to the *Mali* crisis was initiated after the March 2012 coup d'état, at which point the insurgency was already ongoing. The plan was to deploy the ESF as part of a multidimensional mission – MICEMA – that would constitute a regional response to the conflict. The main reason that MICEMA was not deployed was ECOWAS's lack of financial and logistical resources for the mission and the organisation's inability to secure such support from the UN. Ultimately, the UN Security Council passed a resolution supporting the creation of the African-led mission, AFISMA, in December 2012. However, AFISMA did not have the logistical capacity to deploy quickly. This explains why the first external military response to the Mali crisis was the French Operation *Serval* in January 2013, rather than a regional or continental one. Nevertheless, although ECOWAS did not deploy militarily, it has remained actively involved in seeking to manage the Malian crisis through non-military means, particularly through its mediation efforts and by imposing a sanctions regime.

Several issues relevant to our understanding of ECOWAS as a security actor is evident from the Mali experience. First, the organisation's lack of financial and logistical resources to deploy ESF in Mali highlights a significant hurdle for ECOWAS's conflict management mission, as well as casting doubt on the ability of ESF to reach full operational capability by the end of 2015, the revised deadline for the African Standby Force (ASF). Second, it demonstrates the sometimes strained relationship between ECOWAS, the AU (which was central in the discussions surrounding the creation of AFISMA) and the UN. Not only did the UN authorise a similar support package to AFISMA that it had denied MICEMA, but the transition from MICEMA to AFISMA was also rife with tension. These experiences demonstrate the urgent need to improve inter-organisational relations in order to allow for a more efficient response to future crises in the region.

ECOWAS has had little or no involvement in the military response to *Boko Haram*, the armed group that has been launching attacks against targets in Nigeria since 2009. The main reason for this is that Nigeria has not requested any military support from ECOWAS. This is partly due to Nigeria being by far the most powerful ECOWAS member state militarily, something that makes ECOWAS military assistance less vital. Partly, the reason is linked to Nigeria's national pride and preponderant role in the region and reluctance to accept help from smaller member states. Another reason why ECOWAS is not involved in the fight against Boko Haram is that the violence has spread to neighbouring countries (Cameroon, Chad and Niger), partly outside of ECOWAS. This development made clear that the response needed to

be trans-regional. Nigeria was ultimately convinced that it, together with Niger, Chad, Cameroon and Benin, needed to reactivate the Multi-National Joint Task Force (MNJTF) of the Lake Chad Basin Commission in October 2014 to defeat Boko Haram. On January 2015, the AU authorised the initial 12-month deployment of the MNJTF, consisting of up to 7,500 military and civilian staff.

Despite ECOWAS being largely on the sidelines in the military fight against Boko Haram, the Nigerian response to the insurgency has had two major repercussions on the institution's role as a peace and security actor. First, Boko Haram has made the organisation prioritise what it refers to as *terrorism* as a regional security threat. As such, it has developed a counter-terrorism strategy that focuses not only on a military response, but also on preventive measures seeking to counter radicalisation, such as good governance, dealing with unemployment, and social and/or ethnic discrimination. The focus on terrorism also means that ECOWAS sees an urgent need for ESF forces to receive counter-insurgency (COIN) training. This objective is partly being achieved through bilateral COIN training support that Nigeria is currently receiving from various international partners. Second, with Nigerian military forces heavily engaged in the fight against Boko Haram, it is unclear whether Nigerian pledges towards ESF, which constitute 50-60 % of total troops, can actually be counted on if there is a need for it to deploy, either as an ECOWAS mission or as part of ASF.

- ***Democracy and governance deficits***

Close to two thirds of ECOWAS member states are considered less than fully democratic regimes, and good governance, compounded by high levels of corruption, remains an issue. In addition, the last five years have seen unconstitutional changes in governments in Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea-Bissau, Mali and Niger.

ECOWAS has sought to promote democracy in two principal ways. First, it has expanded its role in election monitoring, thereby seeking to prevent leaders coming to power through less than fair elections. Second, the adoption of the *Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance* in 2001 practically translates into a zero-tolerance stance against unconstitutional changes of power, and grants the right to impose sanctions against such illegitimate governments.

Whereas ECOWAS has made important inroads in promoting democracy in the region in the last five years, significant challenges remain. Successes include helping to install an interim government in Burkina Faso following the ousting of long-time president Compaoré in November 2014 and help prepare the country for democratic elections.



Similarly, although ECOWAS was criticised for supporting a transitional government that partly included supporters of the coup that took place in Guinea-Bissau in April 2012, ECOMIB, the ECOWAS mission responsible for supporting national security forces during the subsequent electoral process and security sector reform, has been hailed for helping to stabilise the country, as exemplified by the peaceful presidential election of 2014. In addition, ECOWAS was actively involved in seeking to ensure a lawful election process during the last Nigerian presidential election, work that included seeking to persuade the then current president Jonathan to accept the election result, a feat that was arguably crucial to preventing the election from turning violent. Hence, through this work, ECOWAS is contributing to creating a more democratic culture of governance in the region.

Yet sanctions and threats of intervention failed to convince Ivorian president Gbagbo to accept the electoral results and resign in 2010. Gbagbo was finally deposed by security forces backed by French troops and UN peacekeepers, but only after 3,000 people had been killed in post-election related violence. A recent setback to ECOWAS's democratisation mission also highlights the difficulties ahead. At a May 2015 ECOWAS meeting, a proposal to limit presidential terms to two was ultimately suspended after Togo and the Gambia, the only West African states that do not already impose such a rule, voiced reservations. Whereas it is true that the proposal would have to receive unanimous support from member states for it to be ratified, experts suggests that the ultimate reason why the proposal was not voted in was because various West African leaders beyond those in Togo and the Gambia would prefer to maintain the flexibility to run for a third term by amending their constitutions. As such, this event demonstrates not only the uncomfortable tension between ECOWAS's institutional agenda to democratise the region and the personal agendas of ECOWAS's heads of states, but also reminds us of the influence of the latter in determining whether West Africa will continue to develop in a democratic direction.

Despite ECOWAS having recently taken on a more prominent role in election-related activities, it has been less able to promote good governance issues linked to human security. All but two of the ECOWAS member states (the exceptions being Ghana and Cap Verde) have a low level of human development according to the UN. Although ECOWAS has undoubtedly contributed to improved economic growth in West Africa by promoting free trade within the region, the windfalls of such growth have so far not been directed adequately towards enhancing state capacity to provide social services and reduce youth unemployment, grievances that, if left unaddressed, can result in social protest or people turning

to crime or taking up arms. The reason that ECOWAS has not been able to do more in this sphere is largely due to national economic policy ultimately being up to individual member states. Nevertheless, it seeks to alert its members to the links between good governance, human development and national security. As mentioned above, it does so partly through its new counter-terrorism strategy, which seeks to address the root causes of radicalisation. It also does so through its early-warning system, ECOWARN, that tracks indicators related to, among others, social protest, and reports on these security trends to the Commission.

- ***Transnational crime***

***Transnational trafficking in people, drugs, small arms and light weapons (SALW) and other illicit goods*** continues to undermine state building and contributes to regional insecurity. However, the free trade of people and goods, a founding principle of ECOWAS, makes dealing with these issues more difficult for the organisation. Nevertheless, in 2006, ECOWAS adopted a *Convention on Small Arms and Light Weapons, their Ammunition and Other Related Materials* and launched a small arms initiative (ECOSAP) based in Bamako, Mali, as a capacity-building programme to assist member states and civil society organisations in dealing with the problem of proliferation of SALW. Unfortunately, few visible results have come out of these initiatives, due largely to weak border controls and a generally weak security sector. In response to the lack of progress in this area, the European Union (EU) and Interpol have supported the creation of a West African Police Information System (WAPIS), a programme aimed at sharing information on transnational crime in the region between ECOWAS member states and Mauritania. The hope is that better information sharing will make it easier to develop a regional enforcement strategy against transnational crime. WAPIS seeks to develop national police databases initially, and then link these into a regional system under the auspices of ECOWAS. Currently, national databases of this kind have been set up in Ghana, Mali, Niger and Benin.

***Piracy*** affects all ECOWAS member states who all depend on regional harbours for their trade. The entire coastline is affected, but piracy is particularly common in the Gulf of Guinea, and therefore a great threat to commerce and by extension to economic development in the region. To address maritime security, ECOWAS has established an *Integrated Maritime Strategy* that, among other things, seeks to establish three maritime zones. The first zone to be set up includes areas judged by some to be the epicentre of piracy in the Gulf of Guinea. It includes the waters of Nigeria, Niger, Benin and Togo and a monitoring centre in Cotonou, Benin. Although



coordination, including with Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS), as well as cooperation and intelligence sharing has improved, capacity is a big concern. Despite receiving assistance and training from international partners, including China, the United States (US), the EU and Japan, most West African navies still operate near-obsolete naval ships, naval defence systems and maritime aircraft. The navies also lack the essential radar and remote surveillance systems needed to monitor their vast maritime domains, particularly in real time. Some experts also question the will of navy operators to stop piracy, claiming they are corrupt and receive shares of piracy profits.

### **ECOWAS as a peace and security actor**

Reviewing ECOWAS's responses to challenges to peace and security in the last five years suggests that the institution's conflict prevention tools are currently stronger than its conflict management tools. At present, ESF does not have the logistical and financial capability to deploy militarily. ECOWAS's efforts to address the issue of logistics by building a depot in Sierra Leone are unlikely to solve the problem since it still does not have enough financial resources for either material or strategic airlifts. In addition, given Nigeria's current internal security challenges, it is unclear whether it could spare its pledged troops for an ESF mission. This is a serious problem given that Nigeria is meant to contribute more than half of the pledged ESF troops. Despite these challenges, however, it is important to remember that ECOWAS has been quite successful in helping to stabilise the political situation in Guinea-Bissau through its small peacekeeping mission in the country, ECOMIB.

In contrast, ECOWAS appears to have made significant inroads in its conflict prevention work. The general consensus among experts is that ECOWAS has accomplished quite a lot in the sphere of conflict prevention. ECOWAS's work on democracy, especially as it relates to election monitoring, is often mentioned as an emerging area of success. Another arguably crucial component of conflict prevention is the early warning system, ECOWARN. Monitoring various indicators related to pandemics, social factors believed to be related to social unrest and armed conflict, it seeks to alert the Commission to emerging security threats. Yet, having discerned a critical disconnect between early warning and early response, the directorate is now seeking to develop a national early-warning infrastructure, something it believes will increase ownership and, subsequently, the political will and ability for member states to engage in early response. These efforts will be aided by a major grant from the US. In addition, the EU is devoting substantial funding to supporting

the implementation of ECOWAS's *Conflict and Prevention Framework* by seeking to strengthen the organisation's institutional capacity, with a special focus on the Office of the Commissioner for Political Affairs, Peace and Security.

Yet even an increase in ECOWAS's institutional capacity may matter little if member states are not actively supporting and implementing the organisational agenda. In this regard, Nigeria is likely to be of particular importance. Given that Nigeria is by far the most populous country in ECOWAS and provides about 60 % of its budget, the future direction of the country and ECOWAS's ability to address regional security threats are intimately interlinked. It is too early to tell whether president Buhari will take an active interest and role in ECOWAS or if he will be too immersed in addressing national security threats to do so. However, the fact that Buhari has recently welcomed a joint ECOWAS-ECCAS security summit on how to tackle Boko Haram suggests he may be able to do both.

This analysis is the second in a series of studies. In five briefings, the FOI Studies in African Security Programme analyses the regional organisations' role in countering challenges to peace and security in North, West, East, Central and Southern Africa. For further reading, see FOI's previous publications on the African Peace and Security Architecture at [www.foi.se/africa](http://www.foi.se/africa)