



## Digital Diplomacy: Assessing the Impact of US Counter-Terrorism Initiatives in Africa



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**Abstract:** *Terrorism has rapidly become a new strategy of warfare and a critical security challenge, both in Africa and worldwide, in the aftermath of the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks in the United States. Terrorism has continued to undermine people's fundamental human rights both directly and indirectly on the African continent, for example, contributing to large numbers of people being forcibly displaced from their homes or nations. Currently, there is a fast-expanding trend of terrorist operations throughout Africa, notably in the eastern, northern, and western areas. This article examines US counterterrorism initiatives in Africa via the prism of media tactics. This article delves into the complex network of digital communication strategies used by the US, illustrating how media is strategically used to support diplomatic efforts in Africa by influencing attitudes, shaping narratives, and shaping perceptions.*

**Key Words:** African Continent, USA, Terrorism, Media, Digital Diplomacy, Human Rights, Regional Security Complex

### Introduction

Terrorism is progressively becoming a common and frequently dominating force in our daily lives. Terrorism and extremism are global phenomena. It is transnational terrorism and it is going on in the world. Terrorist organizations like Al-Qaeda and IS were almost defeated in Afghanistan and Pakistan, but these organizations are not dead as they have new safe havens and shifted their command control and structure to the African region. From there, they are now operating with the support of local terrorist organizations (Afzal *et al.*, 2012). They are providing them with support and different expertise for ID making, gorilla war tactics etc. Africa, which is the second largest continent in the world covering a 30.2 million KM<sup>2</sup> area with a 1.3 billion population, is a new epicentre of terrorism. IS and Al-Qaeda are there in Africa

and this region is now the epicentre of terrorism and extremism in modern times (Craft, 2020).

In Africa, there are two active counterterrorism programs. The Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF), which consists of forces from Benin, Cameroon, Chad, Niger, and Nigeria, is the first one. The mission of this task force is to fight the Boko Haram terrorist organization in the Lake Chad Basin area (Agbibo, 2017). The G5 Sahel nations—Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger—also created the Joint Force of the Group of Five for the Sahel (FC-G5S) in 2017. The main goals of this force, which operates within the boundaries of its member countries, are to combat transnational organized crime and counter-terrorism. The deployment of the force was approved by the Council in resolution 2359 on June 21, 2017. The UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali

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(MINUSMA) was subsequently charged by the Council with providing assistance to the force in resolution 2391 on December 8, 2019. On November 20, 2019, Assistant Secretary-General for Africa Bintou Keita updated the Council on the G5 Sahel and noted that "attacks attributed to or claimed by terrorist groups against security forces and civilian populations increased". The terrorist organizations' action, she continued, "virtually links the Joint Force's operational areas with those of the Multinational Joint Task Force in the Lake Chad basin" at this point (Hassan, [2021](#)).

The US counter-terror efforts involve drone strikes against these militant groups, and financial assistance to the local countries to improve their overall human security, special operations were also conducted by the US, especially in the Horn of Africa and the Sahel region. The US along with France and many other countries are trying to improve the security situation in Africa but still, they are lagging since last decade. The US has spent about 6.5 billion dollars and deployed seven thousand troops in Africa to counter terrorism and extremism but still, they are short of their goals because Africa is too big, as it is 30 million square kilometre area and a population of about 1.3 billion. The US is funding the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM), which is a particular mission and a collective effort of the African nations to bring peace and stability to Somalia. The US has spent about two billion dollars in the last decade just in humanitarian assistance and just trying to improve the security situation in Somalia (Agbalajobi, [2021](#)).

In recent years, the rising terrorist threat in Africa has become an increasing concern for the region and the international community. From Boko Haram in Nigeria to al-Shabab in Somalia, from al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb to the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group, the rising threats from the "arc of terror" have become a "plague" for the continent (Bassey, [2023](#)). Recent terrorist assaults in Africa, like the one at the Westgate Mall in Kenya, put this theory to the test. By using three case studies based on the 2010 National Security Strategy and 2011 National Strategy for Counterterrorism, this book investigates the veracity of the

administration's assertions. These tactics' main objective is to stop Africa from becoming a refuge for terrorists. The case studies cover Boko Haram (BH) in Nigeria, al-Shabaab (MYM) in Somalia, and al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) in Mali. Despite appearing to be vanquished in Mali, AQIM has moved to nearby locations without losing its ability to conduct strikes or its financial sources. Similar to how al-Shabaab was forced into rural areas in Somalia, it is ready to retake lost ground if the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) leaves. The severe actions taken by the Nigerian government against Boko Haram can unintentionally act as a recruiting tool for the fledgling terrorist organization. Previous counterterrorism victories in Africa have mostly been tactical and operational, but without changes, they might not translate into long-term strategic success (Ajodo-Adebanjoko *et al.*, 2023). The study suggests that identifying and discarding leaders have been poor strategies in Africa and proposes ways to refocus the strategy for lasting success. A more effective strategy may be to combat Islamist doctrine in order to separate radicals from local support (Harkema, [2014](#)).

## Objectives

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1. To examine US counterterrorism initiatives in Africa
2. To explore Media Coverage of US Anti-Terror Operations in Africa

## Methodology

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To evaluate the effects of US counterterrorism initiatives in Africa in the context of digital diplomacy, the study uses a qualitative research design. Secondary sources such as scholarly publications, government reports, policy papers, and media analysis are used to gather data. Fundamental insights will be obtained by a thorough analysis of academic publications on diplomatic initiatives, digital communication in Africa, and counterterrorism tactics. Digital platforms will be the main focus of media analyses, which will look at how African audiences are exposed to and absorb US counterterrorism themes.

## Regional Security Complex Theory

The Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) is an international relations theory established by Barry Buzan and Ole Weaver in their work *“Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security”* published in 2003. It asserts that international security should be seen from a regional viewpoint and that state-to-state relations follow predictable, geographically grouped patterns. Because regions are interconnected with each other to influence world politics and international security. If one region is engulfed with terrorism, it will have a profound effect on the other region. For instance, terrorism in Afghanistan had an adverse impact on the South Asian region (Bangura, [2023](#)).

## Regional Security Complex

Buzan and Weaver proposed the term "Regional Security Complex" to characterise such arrangements. According to Buzan's theory, the players do not pick the territory; rather, the territory chooses the players. After 9/11, the security situation changed, especially in Afghanistan and the Middle East. The deadly terrorist organizations al-Qaeda and ISIS got new safe havens in the African region after being pushed by the U.S. and its allied forces. They got command and control over the local terrorist organizations of Africa concerning al-Shabab, Boko Haram, and Ansarul Islam, which consisted of another four terrorist organizations Ansar-ud-Din, Macina Liberation Front, Almourabitoun, and AQIM. These four groups were together under one umbrella, which is called Nusrat UL Islam. These terrorist organizations are a serious threat to regional and International Security as they can easily target any country in the world. Keeping in view these above-mentioned viewpoints, Regional Security Complex Theory makes sense in linking it to the current study (Okumu, [2020](#)).

The US counterterrorism policy in Africa, which focuses on Boko Haram and Al-Shabaab, makes use of the Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), which offers helpful perspectives into the complexities of regional security in the African context. This theory provides a framework for comprehending

how governments see security risks and communicate with one another in a particular area. This theory can clarify the complicated dynamics of regional security factors and the US' involvement in resolving these difficulties in the cases of Boko Haram and Al-Shabaab (Oluwole, [2022](#)).

Non-state groups that have harmed regional security include Boko Haram, which is predominantly active in Nigeria and its neighboring nations, and Al-Shabaab, which is present in Somalia and the Horn of Africa. The interdependence of states within a security complex and the consequences of security threats are both highlighted by RSCT. In this situation, the acts of Boko Haram and Al-Shabaab have an effect on not just the immediately impacted nations but also the whole region (Okumu, [2020](#)).

By examining how the US sees and responds to various regional security challenges, one may examine the US counterterrorism policy in Africa through an RSCT perspective. The US' participation in counterterrorism initiatives, intelligence sharing, and capacity development in impacted nations demonstrates its understanding of the interconnectedness of security in the Sahel and Horn of Africa areas. The US wants to stabilize the larger security complex, stop the spread of terrorism, and safeguard its national interests by confronting these challenges (Adejumo et al., [2022](#)).

Additionally, RSCT emphasizes how regional organizations and players influence security dynamics. Individual governments, regional economic communities, and the African Union (AU) all play important roles in combating Boko Haram and Al-Shabaab. Collaboration with these regional players is a frequent component of the US counterterrorism policy, highlighting the complex's cooperative tendency in tackling common security problems. The role that identities and perceptions have in influencing security dynamics is also highlighted by RSCT. Both its interests and its position as a major player motivate the US' involvement in Africa in international security. Its engagement reflects a sense of obligation to fight terrorism and advance global stability, which is consistent with its self-

perception as a leader in the international security community.

As a result, the US counterterrorism policy in Africa with regard to Boko Haram and Al-Shabaab benefits from the use of Regional Security Complex Theory, which improves our comprehension of the complex regional security dynamics. The interdependence of nations within a security complex, the function of regional players, and the impact of perceptions and identities are all highlighted. By examining these elements, we may better understand the difficulties of combating terrorism in Africa and its wider consequences for international security (Agbalajobi, [2021](#)).

Moving ahead, it is clear that terrorism and violent extremism present serious difficulties to US counterterrorism policy in the Sahel and Horn of Africa regions. In these regions, a number of terrorist groups have developed, with each having their own goals but usually attempting to install Islamic caliphates and sow unrest. These groups include AQIM, ISGS, JNIM, Al-Shabaab, and ISS. Along with regional allies like France and initiatives like the G5 Sahel Joint Force and the Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership, the US has chosen a comprehensive approach that includes military operations, diplomatic efforts, and development support. However, problems including political instability, breaches of human rights, and a lack of resources have hampered the effectiveness of this method, stressing the need for a more adaptable and holistic approach addressing the underlying causes of extremism and promoting stability (Apuuli, [2021](#)).

Furthermore, a comprehensive approach addressing politics, security, and development at the same time is required for long-term peace and stability in the Sahel and Horn of Africa regions, which are also plagued by armed conflicts, political instability, and humanitarian catastrophes. International organizations like the UN and the World Bank understand the need for comprehensive programs that go beyond security measures and concentrate on enhancing living circumstances, fostering community, and giving chances to young people. Countries like the US, the UK, and China place a strong emphasis on

the necessity of addressing economic and social problems, creating opportunity for underprivileged populations, and boosting security. The African Union (AU), which has the potential to develop into an organization resembling the European Union (EU), plays a vital role in resolving security issues on the continent despite difficulties with funding and decision-making. To handle complex security issues and advance peace and stability, cooperation, commitment to shared values, and diplomatic efforts are essential (Arslan, [2022](#)).

### **Media Coverage of US Anti-Terror Operations in Africa**

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As modern combat and diplomacy evolve, US counterterrorism activities in Africa are becoming more and more entwined with sophisticated media strategies. The United States employs a strategic media deployment approach to effectively negotiate intricate hurdles and capitalize on opportunities in the fight against terrorism on the African continent. An essential component of US counterterrorism initiatives in Africa is the understanding of the media's pivotal function in molding public opinion, influencing storylines, and promoting global collaboration. The US spreads strategic messages using a range of media channels, such as social media, traditional television, and online publishing, to refute extremist propaganda and advance stories of cooperation, moderation, and resilience (Bamako, [2021](#)).

As a communication tool and a battlefield for swaying opinions and narratives, the media is vital to the development and support of US counterterrorism efforts in Africa. The United States efficiently combats terrorism on the African continent by navigating complicated challenges and seizing opportunities through strategic interaction with multiple media channels. First and foremost, the media provides a forum for the dissemination of calculated messages meant to refute radical narratives and advance alternate points of view. US officials and diplomats interact with domestic and foreign media to explain the reasoning behind counterterrorism initiatives, showcase accomplishments, and respond to public

concerns. The United States of America seeks to promote mutual understanding, establish trust, and combat false information spread by terrorist organizations by offering precise facts and context. Furthermore, within African communities that are susceptible to radicalization, the media plays a crucial role in elevating voices of moderation and resistance. The US helps spread ideas that encourage tolerance, resiliency, and peaceful coexistence through collaborations with regional journalists, civil society organizations, and religious leaders. The US aims to reduce the attractiveness of terrorist ideology and increase community resilience by giving credible local voices the opportunity to oppose extremism and promote inclusive narratives. In addition, the media provides a forum for emphasizing the human cost of terrorism and the results of US counterterrorism operations around the globe. The US emphasizes the value of international cooperation in combating this common threat by communicating the facts of terrorism through gripping storytelling, multimedia content, and firsthand accounts. Through highlighting the human cost of extremism and highlighting the principles of freedom, democracy, and the rule of law, the US hopes to mobilize African people and allies to support its counterterrorism efforts (Pamuk, 2020).

Apart from acting as a medium for communication, the media also helps the many parties participating in counterterrorism operations to work together and coordinate their efforts. Real-time communication, information exchange, and activity coordination between US agencies, African nations, and regional organizations are made possible via digital platforms. The United States of America (US) promotes communication, creates networks, and fortifies alliances in the war against terror by utilizing social media, online discussion boards, and virtual conferences. But there are dangers and obstacles the media poses for US counterterrorism efforts in Africa. Terrorist organizations threaten the stability and security of the region by using digital media to spread propaganda, find supporters, and plan attacks. Online disinformation and extremist narratives have the power to exacerbate radicalization and

thwart attempts to combat violent extremism (Apuuli, 2021).

## Results

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The way that the US counterterrorism actions in the region are perceived and perceived in turn is greatly influenced by media coverage. A review of media coverage indicates that African and worldwide media outlets present a mixed picture of US initiatives, with both positive and negative stories predominating. Positive coverage focuses on humanitarian attempts to address the underlying causes of terrorism, successful operations, and collaboration between US and African security forces. Nonetheless, unfavorable reporting frequently concentrates on claims of violations of human rights, civilian deaths, and US interventionism. Additionally, the study notes how media framing differs between African nations, reflecting various linguistic, cultural, and political circumstances. In general, African audiences' perceptions of US counterterrorism measures are shaped by media coverage, which also has an impact on public opinion, diplomatic ties, and the success of digital diplomacy initiatives in the area.

## Conclusion

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It is clear from evaluating US counterterrorism measures in Africa through the prism of digital diplomacy that the strategic use of digital tools has greatly increased the efficacy of counterterrorism operations throughout the continent. The United States has successfully navigated difficult situations and taken advantage of possibilities to fight terrorism in creative ways by engaging, collaborating, and communicating with targeted individuals. The capacity of digital diplomacy to fight extremist narratives and magnify strategic communications throughout Africa is one of its main advantages. The US undermines the appeal of terrorist ideas and equips communities to withstand radicalization by spreading messages of resilience, moderation, and cooperation through social media platforms, online publications, and digital initiatives. The US has successfully engaged with a variety of audiences, including government officials, civil society



organizations, religious leaders, and the general public, by utilizing the reach and accessibility of digital platforms. This has allowed for the promotion of alternative narratives to counter extremist propaganda and fostered dialogue. Furthermore, digital diplomacy makes it easier for all parties involved in counterterrorism operations to coordinate and communicate in real time. US authorities can work with African governments, regional organizations, and civil society groups through virtual forums, webinars, and online conferences. They can share information, exchange best practices, and create plans to deal with common security concerns. By utilizing digital platforms for networking, information exchange, and capacity-building programs, the United States improves the efficacy of regional counterterrorism cooperation. Additionally, the US may carry out focused outreach and establish connections with important stakeholders in communities of Africans who are susceptible to radicalization thanks to digital diplomacy. Through social media campaigns, online forums, and digital storytelling, the US engages local religious leaders, youth activists, and influencers to promote inclusivity, stimulate dialogue, and empower communities to oppose extremist ideology. Digital platforms give disadvantaged voices a forum, boosting community-led approaches to counterterrorism and bolstering resilience against radicalization. To sum up, digital diplomacy has greatly influenced US counterterrorism efforts in Africa by creating fresh avenues for interaction, participation, and

cooperation in the war on terror. The US has improved its capacity to refute extremist narratives, forge alliances, and enable communities to fend off radicalization by carefully utilizing digital tools and platforms. This has ultimately helped to create a safer and more secure Africa.

## **Recommendations**

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- In order to create a more unbiased image of US actions, encourage media sources to highlight effective counterterrorism operations, collaboration between US and African forces, and humanitarian measures to address the underlying causes of terrorism.
- To build credibility and trust, the US should be more transparent in its counterterrorism efforts and interact with the media to address concerns about human rights violations and civilian casualties.
- Adapt messaging and communication tactics to the various cultural and linguistic contexts found in Africa to guarantee that US counterterrorism initiatives are understood appropriately and with respect by various populations.
- Increase outreach initiatives to interact with regional bloggers, journalists, and social media influencers in order to dispute false information and promote good narratives, utilizing the media's ability to support US diplomatic goals.

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