

Rising Terrorist Threats in North-West Africa and Challenges and Opportunities for India's Counterterrorism Cooperation

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The North-West Africa region, comprising Maghreb and Sahel countries, forms an important component of India's foreign policy towards Africa and West Asia and North Africa (WANA) regions. Over the years, India's engagement with the North-West African countries has evolved with improvements in political, diplomatic, economic, security and defence relations. Notwithstanding the disturbances due to the Arab Spring protests and political instability, India strived to continue political contacts, economic exchanges and diplomatic relations with the regional countries. The rise of Salafi-Jihadi terrorism is a major threat that poses challenges for global peace and security, including of India and its surrounding areas. The growing threats from terrorist groups, such as Boko Haram, Islamic State (ISIS or Daesh) and Al-Qaeda, have led India to develop counterterrorism cooperation with multiple countries in different parts of the world, including in North-West Africa. These emerge not only from India's broader commitment to fight terrorism in all its forms and manifestations, but also from its commitment to help developing states in the Africa build capacity in facing developmental and security challenges. This article analyses the rapid rise in incidents of terrorism and proliferation of terrorist groups in the North-West Africa region, especially since 2010–11, and how it

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poses a threat to the region's security. It delineates the progress in India's counterterrorism cooperation with the North-West African countries and highlights the challenges and opportunities in enhancing security and counterterrorism cooperation in the region.

Keywords: *Terrorism; Counterterrorism; Maghreb; Sahel; WANA; India; Regional Security*

INTRODUCTION

Every part of the world today faces the threat of terrorism in one form or another. All continents from Americas to Europe and Asia to Africa to Oceania have faced the brunt of international terrorism. Nonetheless, the majority of the contemporary international terrorist groups have originated from and are concentrated in the South-West Asia and North-West Africa regions. Several interrelated factors have contributed to this, but most importantly a continuous state of war, strife and conflicts due to fighting among domestic actors and external military interventions and widespread poverty and impoverishment due to lack of governance and weak states have created and sustained the fertile ground for the origin and spread of terrorism in these areas. Additionally, the presence of a potent ideology, gradually come to be defined as 'Salafi-Jihadism,' has catalysed the origin and spread of international terrorism in these geographically contiguous regions. This ideology has simultaneously helped in the globalisation of the terrorist threat.¹ Alternatively, the spread of international terrorism to different parts of the world has led to greater recognition among states of the need for counterterrorism cooperation to effectively defeat this menace. Therefore, in the 21st century, there is a clear momentum towards developing counterterrorism cooperation across countries and continents.

India has faced the problem of terrorism for a long time. It raised the need for a multilateral convention on combating terrorism by proposing the Comprehensive Convention on International Terrorism (CCIT) at the United Nations General Assembly in 1996.² Although in 2023, the proposal remains deadlocked due to a lack of consensus among world powers, the need for greater counterterrorism cooperation continues to be felt. India has, therefore, adopted the policy of developing counterterrorism cooperation at the bilateral and multilateral levels with likeminded countries and regional organisations.³ Simultaneously, New Delhi has continued to raise the issue of threats from international terrorism and the need to develop greater cooperation against all forms of terrorism at multiple regional and

international fora. Addressing the third ministerial conference on countering terror financing, which was themed ‘No Money for Terror’ held in New Delhi in November 2022, Prime Minister Narendra Modi noted that India ‘face[d] the horrors of terror long before the world took serious note of it’ and that ‘Only a uniform, unified and zero-tolerance approach can defeat terrorism.’⁴

Terrorism is a major threat to peace and stability in Africa. The threat becomes more potent because of the underlying socio-economic and political factors, including widespread poverty and corruption, intermittent conflicts and violence, ethnic and sectarian tensions, weak states and unstable governments and proliferation of Salafi-Jihadist groups, especially in the Maghreb and Sahel regions.⁵ Among the groups active in the area are the affiliates of global terrorist organisations, such as Al-Qaeda and Islamic State (Daesh), and locally evolved groups such as Boko Haram, Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimeen (JNIM), Ansar al-Dine, Ansar al-Sharia and others. Over the years, India’s engagements with the African countries have evolved with improvements in political, diplomatic, economic, security and defence relations. The rise of terrorist threats in the continent has led India to develop counterterrorism cooperation in Africa as part of the broader aim of fighting terrorism in all its forms and manifestations and because of New Delhi’s commitments to help African nations build capacity in resolving their developmental and security challenges.⁶

This article, thus, focuses on the terrorist threats in North-West Africa, especially in the Maghreb and Sahel regions and maps the progress in India’s counterterrorism cooperation with the regional countries. Among the countries the article looks at are Algeria, Libya, Morocco and Tunisia in Maghreb, and Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, Nigeria and Chad in Sahel. Locating this within the broader Indian outreach to Africa and more specifically North Africa, the article underlines the scope for deepening counterterrorism cooperation in the North-West Africa region and suggests policy recommendations, accordingly.

SPREAD OF TERRORISM IN NORTH-WEST AFRICA

Africa is a vast and heterogenous continent and is second-largest in area and population after Asia. Of course, it means that the problems and challenges faced by the countries in the region are wide and diverse. Similarly, the response of different countries to the challenges faced by them have

been varied. While recognising the diversity and heterogeneity of Africa, developmental studies scholars note some trends that are common to most countries in different parts of Africa. A key aspect that cuts across the continent is a young population and vast natural resources, which also underlines the massive developmental and growth potential of African nations. Some of the countries such as Libya, Rwanda, Botswana, Senegal, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Kenya, Burkina Faso and Ivory Coast were among the fastest growing economies in the world in 2021 in terms of nominal GDP growth rate.⁷

Nonetheless, in large part many countries in Africa have faced serious developmental challenges due to the chronic pillaging of the continent's resources by external powers and by the mismanagement of resources, including human resource, by local elites. One of the key challenges in Africa is proliferation of terrorism. Countries in North-West Africa, in the Maghreb and Sahel regions, have for long faced threats of terrorism but the situation has become more critical over the decade since 2011. In October 2022, while briefing the UN Security Council (UNSC), Ghada Waly, the head of UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNDOC), said that the 'threat of terrorism and organised crime is becoming increasingly entrenched across Africa' even more in the 'vast Sahel region' that has 'become home to some of the most active and deadly terrorist groups.'⁸

Among the Maghreb and Sahel countries that are worst affected by terrorism are conflict-ridden Libya, uprising-affected Tunisia, Mali, Burkina Faso and the Lake Chad Basin covering Cameroon, Chad, Niger and Nigeria. According to the *Global Terrorism Index 2023*, the Sahel region has emerged as the 'epicentre of terrorism' in 2022, accounting for nearly 43 per cent of total terrorism-related deaths in the world.⁹ The report further notes 'Of particular concern are two countries, Burkina Faso and Mali, which accounted for 73 percent of terrorism deaths in the Sahel in 2022.'¹⁰ Nonetheless, the spread of Salafi-Jihadist terror in the region is not a new phenomenon. Jeff Gilmour, a veteran of the US Navy and researcher with the University of Calgary in Alberta, Canada, who has followed the terrorism-related developments in North-West Africa notes the involvement of Al-Qaeda in the Luxor bombing targeting tourists in Egypt in 1997 and blasts outside US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998.¹¹ But the situation in the aftermath of the Arab Spring uprisings became more difficult compared to how it was in the late 1990s mainly because of the consolidation among local and international terrorist groups and also their spread to newer areas.

Ideological Underpinnings of Terrorism in Maghreb and Sahel

A key aspect of the spread of terrorism in the Maghreb and Sahel regions is the proliferation of the Salafi-Jihadist ideology. Jihad is a concept in Islamic theology that most generally relates to two aspects: one in a spiritual sense and the other as a way of combat. In the spiritual form, it is interpreted as the internal struggle of an individual to find his/her true self and the connection with the divine, known theologically as *jihad al-akbar* (greater jihad). An armed fight against the enemy in time of combat is considered *jihad al-asghar* (lesser jihad) and this is often compared in literature to the concept of Holy War.¹² Salafism, on the other hand, is a strand in Sunni Islam with roots in medieval era wherein some theologians rejected the concept of *taqlid*, that is, the practice of following the interpretation of four recognised and established Sunni schools of jurisprudence (Shafi'i, Maliki, Hanbali and Hanafi) to instead recognise the practice and saying of the first three generation of Muslims (*al-Salaf al-Saleh*) as the only authentic source for interpreting the scriptures—Quran and Hadith.¹³ In modern times, both ideas—Jihadism and Salafism—went through various interpretations and re-interpretations and spread in different parts of the world in different forms.

The adoption and interpretation of these ideas by the extremist and radical elements to justify terrorism as a form of legitimate armed Islamic struggle against European and American colonial and imperial occupation and Christian-Western domination of Muslim lands and culture as well as a struggle to purge Islam of any 'non-Islamic' influence (including Sufi and Shi'a practices) gave rise to the hybrid ideology of Salafi-Jihadism.¹⁴ It also became a potent tool in the hands of the likes of Osama bin Laden and Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi to gain a large following and inspire more like them to take up the so-called cause of saving Islam. Shiraz Maher, a well-known Pakistani-origin-British author, and fundamentalist-turned-critic of radical Islam, traces the origin of Salafi-Jihadism as 'grounded in the experiences of Sunni Islam over the last century and beyond' and emanating from 'a broad and varied ecosystem of dense Islamic jurisprudence.'¹⁵

Among the 20th century Islamist scholars who contributed to the early development of the idea of Islamic struggle against Western domination were Egyptian Syed Qutb and Indian-Pakistani Abul A'la Maududi. But the most important ideologues who were instrumental in the consolidation of Salafi-Jihadism as an ideology of terror are Abdullah Azzam, Anwar al-Awlaki and Abu Musab al-Zarqawi.¹⁶ Salafi-Jihadist terrorism, as it is known in its current form, is most importantly rooted in the Afghan-Jihad movement of the 1980s, which led to the birth of Al-Qaeda. It is from Al-Qaeda that many

new and splinter groups spread to the South-West Asia, North-West Africa and other parts of the world.

Active Terror Groups in Maghreb and Sahel

The most notable terrorist groups active in the Maghreb and Sahel regions as of 2022–23 are Al-Qaeda in Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Islamic State Provinces in Western Africa (IS-WAP) and Greater Sahara (IS-GSP), Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimeen (JNIM) and Boko Haram. In addition, there are several local terrorist groups that are active in the region including Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia, Ansaroul Islam in Burkina Faso and many of the remnants of the Algerian and Libyan civil wars that have either merged with bigger groups or have established local networks working with multiple groups involved in terrorist activities and organised crime.

AQIM: The AQIM has its roots in the Algerian civil war wherein the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (known by French acronym GSPC) was most active in the 1990s. The GSPC suffered serious losses during the final phases of the Algerian civil war and joined the reconciliation process in mid-2000s. However, in 2006–07, a faction of GSPC affiliated itself with Al-Qaeda to become its branch in North-West Africa, namely Al-Qaeda in Islamic Maghreb. The AQIM continues to be active in the Maghreb and Sahel regions and is considered to be most active in the bordering areas of Libya, Algeria, Niger, Mali, Mauritania and Western Sahara.¹⁷ In its early phase, between 2007 and 2012, the group was mainly active in Algeria and Mali and perpetrated numerous terrorist attacks in the two countries. In recent years, however, the group has expanded its operations in other regional countries including Chad and Ivory Coast. The AQIM's activities were severely curtailed due to France's counterterrorism cooperation (Operation Barkhane) in cooperation with five regional countries—Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger—that began in 2014 and came to an end in November 2022.¹⁸ The group is, as per available reports, currently headed by an Algerian Islamist militant Abu Ubaidah Youssef Al-Anaabi who took over the reign in June 2020. Among other Al-Qaeda affiliates that are active in North Africa is Al-Shabab, which functions as its affiliate in Somalia and neighbouring countries.

IS-WAP and IS-GSP: After the Islamic State in Iraq and Levant (ISIL), also known as Islamic State or Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and by the Arabic acronym Daesh, gained prominence in Iraq and Syria during 2012–14, several global Salafi-Jihadist groups became affiliated with it to establish its so-called provinces (*wilayat*) in different parts of the world.

Among the most important groups that pledged allegiance to Daesh and its leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, who in 2014 declared himself as the Caliph, was Boko Haram and its leader Abubakar Shekau in March 2015. This led to the birth of IS-WAP. However, when counterterrorism measures by the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF)—a coalition of Cameroon, Chad, Niger, Nigeria and Benin—intensified, the group faced serious reverses and internal difference cropped up. This led to Shekau parting ways to revive the Boko Haram. While IS-WAP continued to gain ground in the Lake Chad Basin, Boko Haram became active in Nigeria and to an extent in Mali. IS-WAP and Boko Haram also got into a turf war during 2020–21 that reportedly led to the killing of Shekau in May 2021.¹⁹ For most of the time since its foundation, IS-WAP has been led by Abu Musab al-Barnawi, son of Boko Haram founder Mohammed Yusuf, and an aide-turned-foe of Shekau.

IS-GSP emerged from the 2015 split in the Mourabitoun movement when its leader Adnan Abu Walid al-Sahrawi decided to pledge allegiance to Daesh and Baghdadi. This was not accepted by the Algerian faction of the Mourabitoun led by Mokhtar Belmokhtar who decided to merge with AQIM.²⁰ IS-GSP is active in parts of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger and has proved to be one of the deadliest in terms of attacks on civilians and causing deaths. Between 2021 and 2022, many of the group's leaders including its chief al-Sahrawi and one of the founding leaders Oumeya Ould Albakaye, were killed or captured in a French counterinsurgency operation in the Sahel region. The group to an extent lost its potency after the elimination of al-Sahrawi; however, it remains a threat.

Among other Daesh provinces in North-West Africa are Islamic State-Libya Province and Islamic State-Algeria Province, but due to action by local security agencies in Algeria and multinational forces in Libya these groups have not been able to gain any significant ground.

JNIM: The group was formed in 2017 after the merger of four terrorist groups or their splinters in Mali and adjoining areas. The most important of these groups is the Mali-based Ansar al-Dine, led by Iyad Ghali who has been leading an Islamist rebellion in the country since 1990s and was one of the major perpetrators of the attack in Timbaktu in 2012.²¹ The JNIM has reportedly at times worked in tandem with IS-GSP and has also competed with it to gain followers and territory. JNIM attacks are largely responsible for the notable uptick in terrorism-related deaths in the Sahel region, contributing to North-West Africa emerging as one of the global terrorist hotspots.²² JNIM has worked as an affiliate of Al-Qaeda in the Sahel region and has expanded its operations from Mali to Niger, Burkina Faso, Senegal

and Ivory Coast. It has also reportedly become adept at remaining less affected by counterterrorism operations by national and international security forces due to its entrenchment in local criminal networks and adapting to the social milieu by exploiting local problems and divisions.²³

Boko Haram: Another regional group that has been active is Boko Haram that is mostly based in Nigeria but has operated in neighbouring Chad, Niger, Cameroon and Mali as well. The group was formed in 2002 by Mohammed Yusuf, a radical local preacher in Nigeria. After Yusuf was captured and killed by Nigerian security forces in 2009 in a counterterrorism operation, the mantle of the group came in the hands of Abubakar Shekau, who was Yusuf's close aide. Under Shekau, Boko Haram turned into one of the most ruthless and brutal terrorist groups, employing tactics such as abduction and killing of children and enslavement of girls.²⁴ For a brief period in 2015–16, the group affiliated itself with the Islamic State to form IS-WAP and after splitting with it fought against it for regional pre-eminence. According to media reports, the group along with IS-WAP has been responsible for nearly 350,000 deaths and over 3 million displacements in the Lake Chad Basin since its formation in 2002.²⁵ However, the group has reportedly been weakened and has slowed down after the killing of Shekau in the turf war with IS-WAP in 2021.

Regional and International Responses

The worst-affected countries in Sahel are Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Chad, Ivory Coast, Mali, Nigeria, Niger and to a lesser extent Senegal. Among the Maghreb countries the most affected are Libya and Western Sahara and to a lesser extent Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco. The national, regional and international responses have been mixed with varying degree of success. Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia have been, to a notable extent, successful in keeping the threat under control and have not allowed the radical Salafi-Jihadist groups to gain substantive ground. Algeria with its experience of fighting a bloody civil war against Islamist rebels and the post-conflict reconciliation has done relatively better in keeping Al-Qaeda, Daesh and its affiliates away from gaining any ground in the country.²⁶

Morocco and Tunisia too have been relatively more successful in keeping the country politically and economically stable to not allow the issue of terrorism to fester, although in Tunisia's case the situation has begun to unravel under President Kais Saied.²⁷ Nonetheless, some radical groups, both local and international, remain active in both the countries. In Libya, the Islamic State had gained substantive ground especially in the vast desert areas in the southern regions, but military action by the coalition of

Egypt, France, the UAE and the Libyan National Army (LNA) supported by the US technical support and the actions by Türkiye, Qatar, Italy and the Government of National Accord (GNA) helped in defeating the terrorist groups and disarranging of Islamic State-Libya Province.

The situation in the Sahel region has been more delicate and the regional countries have found it difficult to mobilise enough resources and military might to be able to adequately fulfil the demands of counterterrorism. Malian and Nigerian forces have often found it difficult to fight with the multiple big and small terrorist groups active inside their borders, and so have Chad, Niger and other regional countries. The Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF), essentially a Nigerian initiative going back to the 1990s, got revived in 2015 with Niger, Nigeria, Chad and Cameroon, along with a non-combatant role for Benin, deciding to reinforce the operational capacity with the headquarter in N'Djamena, Chad. The MNJTF received support from various quarters including the United Nations (UN), African Union (AU) and the European Union (EU) besides getting technical support and help in capacity-building and liaison from the United States, the United Kingdom and France. In addition, the French military undertook Operation Barkhane during 2014–22 to defeat the terrorist groups creating havoc in Sahel and the Lake Chad Basin. Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger have also partnered with France to tackle the terrorist threats inside their borders. The French military intervention came to an end in November 2022 after differences emerged between France and regional countries over operational aspects. Nonetheless, the French intervention was significant in limiting the spread of terrorist groups in the region.²⁸

INDIA AND COUNTERTERRORISM IN NORTH-WEST AFRICA

Minster of External Affairs, Dr S. Jaishankar while addressing a gathering at the Indian Council of World Affairs (ICWA) in May 2022 said 'We are very conscious of the expanding threats posed by radicalism and fundamentalism and terrorism to African societies. These have been the subject of our contemporary agenda of cooperation.'²⁹ This statement in a way sums up the way India has been building security and counterterrorism relations with Africa. Notably, India has been a victim of international terrorism for long,³⁰ and this has shaped its world view towards the need for developing a broader counterterrorism cooperation in different regions and with different countries. So far as the Sahel and Maghreb regions are concerned, the expansion of the broad political, economic and security ties has to be viewed within the context

of India's growing engagements with Africa and WANA. New Delhi has considerably expanded its outreach towards Africa to harness relations with friendly countries for economic and security cooperation and for advancing trade and commerce as well as to build lasting defence and security ties in Africa. The India–Africa Defence Ministers Conclave held in Lucknow in 2020 and India–Africa Defence Dialogue (IADD) in Gandhinagar in 2022 affirmed the need for furthering the defence and security ties between India and Africa.³¹

While India continues to be committed to peacekeeping in conflict-ridden areas in Africa through its contribution to the UN peacekeeping missions to which it is one of the largest contributors in the world, New Delhi is also looking to furthering defence, security and counterterrorism cooperation with Africa, including in North-West Africa.³² India's long experience of fighting terror and the need to develop closer counterterrorism cooperation with likeminded countries has led it to develop collaboration with countries such as the United States, Israel, France, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Egypt and other regional countries in Africa and WANA. The same is being replicated in the case of Maghreb and Sahel countries and the exact nature of cooperation has been adapted to the specific needs and requirements of each country.

Counterterrorism Cooperation in Maghreb and Sahel

At this stage, India's counterterrorism with African nations including in Maghreb and Sahel regions is indirect at best.³³ Notably, the focus has been on 'setting up of defence academies and colleges, deployment of training teams, provision of ammunition and equipment to some African countries and the hosting of Africa India Field Training Exercises (AFINDEX).'³⁴ In October 2015, during the third India–Africa Forum Summit held in New Delhi, the Delhi Declaration 2015 was issued. Among other issues, it underlined the need for improving counterterrorism cooperation between India and Africa. It noted the need for enhancing 'cooperation and coordination between Africa and India to combat terrorism in all its forms and manifestations.'³⁵ At the same time, it called for adoption of the Comprehensive Convention on International Terrorism (CCIT) by the UN, recognising that extremism, radicalism and terrorism have 'emerged as primary threats to nations and our societies and condemn them in all their forms and manifestations.'³⁶

During the IADD in 2022, the Gandhinagar Declaration was adopted, calling for 'India and African countries to explore new areas of convergence for defence engagements, including capacity-building, training, cyber security,

maritime security and counter terrorism.³⁷ During India's presidency of the UNSC in August 2021, New Delhi made a strong call for adoption of the CCIT citing the return of Taliban in Afghanistan and the surge in terrorist attacks in Africa.³⁸ In November 2022, India's permanent representative to the United Nations Ruchira Kamboj while speaking at the UNSC briefing on its counterterrorism committees noted the need for 'countering terrorist narratives; preventing and countering the use of the Internet and new and emerging technologies for terrorist purposes' in the light of the continued terrorist threats in several parts of the world including in Africa.³⁹

Among the Maghreb and Sahel countries, India has been discussing the need for strengthening counterterrorism cooperation with Tunisia, Morocco, Algeria and Nigeria. During Vice President Hamid Ansari's visit to five countries in North-West Africa in 2016, the issue of terrorism and counterterrorism cooperation featured prominently in the bilateral discussions. In May–June, the Vice President visited Morocco and Tunisia and in September–October he visited Nigeria, Mali and Algeria. During a press conference with Tunisian Prime Minister Habib Essid, Ansari noted that 'successfully dealing with such [terrorist] threats requires strong cooperation among like-minded partners.'⁴⁰ He further underlined that India and Tunisia have 'discussed the issues related to combating this [terrorist] challenge and decided to enhance our cooperation in the field of counter-terrorism.'⁴¹ In October 2017, when Tunisian Foreign Minister Khemaies Jhinaoui visited India to co-chair the 12th India–Tunisia Joint Commission Meeting (JCM), the two sides agreed to develop closer cooperation in counterterrorism and combating organised crime.⁴²

India and Morocco signed an MoU on counterterrorism cooperation in February 2019 during External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj's visit to the country. The two countries decided to set up a Joint Working Group (JWG) on counterterrorism 'to develop a comprehensive approach to combat terrorism including cross-border terrorism, misuse of internet including social media by terror entities; terrorist financing, recruitment of members of terrorist groups (sic).'⁴³ In October 2016, during Vice President Ansari's visit, India and Algeria 'reiterated their resolve to fight against the menace of terrorism,' underlining that this 'has become a serious threat to global peace and security.' The issue of enhancing security and counterterrorism cooperation also featured prominently during the Mali and Nigeria legs of the Vice President's North-Africa visit.⁴⁴

In March 2021, during the Nigerian National Security Advisor Babagana Monguno's visit to New Delhi for the First India–Nigeria Strategic and

Counterterrorism Dialogue, the two sides agreed to enhance cooperation against all forms of terrorism.⁴⁵ In November 2022, the Nigerian Interior Minister attended the 'No Money for Terror' conference in New Delhi and stated that India's efforts to fight terrorism has been significant and that Nigeria looks forward to develop greater counterterrorism cooperation with India.⁴⁶ With other majorly affected countries in the Maghreb and Sahel regions including Libya, Chad, Burkina Faso, Cameroon and Mali, thus far, there has been only limited movement towards developing defence, security and counterterrorism cooperation though in the bilateral and multilateral discussions there is a recognition of the need for strengthening cooperation in fighting terror.

Opportunities and Challenges

India has committed itself to enhancing defence, security and counterterrorism cooperation with Africa including in North-West Africa. In the Maghreb and Sahel regions that are currently the worst affected from terrorism, India has had only limited counterterrorism cooperation. While in other parts of Africa India has invested in capacity-building and in setting up of infrastructure and training, in Sahel and Maghreb the progress in counterterrorism cooperation has been slow and has remained confined to discussions and inclusion in joint statements with countries such as Morocco and Nigeria. With other regional countries, the intent has been shown and agreements and MoUs have also been signed but the progress has been extremely slow. This requires a degree of renewed focus as far as India's Africa outreach and defence and security cooperation is concerned. Some of the recent efforts by the Government of India, such as regular high-level meetings and defence dialogues, can go a long way in paving the path for strengthening counterterrorism cooperation, but these need to be followed up with regularity by bringing the multiple stakeholders together.

There, however, remain serious challenges to furthering counterterrorism cooperation both at the domestic and external levels. The multiplicity of stakeholders within the country with mandates related to terrorism often leads to a lack of clarity on how to move forward. The Ministry of Defence (MoD) and the military while facilitating and engaging in peacekeeping and other security-related cooperation do not directly engage in counterterrorism cooperation externally. Since the issue of terrorism pertains to national security, it comes directly under the purview of the Prime Minister's Office and the National Security Advisor and other agencies that engage in the domains of counterterrorism and combating radicalism. While this may not

be a problem per se, the priority mostly remains on the domestic front and the immediate and extended neighbourhoods. This means that the Maghreb and Sahel regions are not among the priorities so far as counterterrorism cooperation is concerned.

Other challenges pertain to the limited resources and expertise that can be spared for the geographically distant countries. The lack of familiarity and experience with the regions' political, security and social milieu also pose a challenge to the possibility of expanding cooperation in counterterrorism. These can, however, be overcome with sustained engagement, prioritising resources and greater engagements. Challenges are also associated with exploring the possibilities of establishing and widening institutionalised intelligence sharing measures to mitigate the threat of terrorism. Moreover, with the ever-expanding scope of terrorism due to technological advancements, there remains the challenge of expanding counterterrorism cooperation cyber security and threats of use of advanced technologies by terrorist groups. Further, challenges also pertain to threats to maritime security in the Mediterranean Sea.

A key step that can be taken is to appoint a special envoy for North and West Africa on counterterrorism. This can help in bringing a more focussed approach in understanding the needs of the Maghreb and Sahel countries in devising specific outcome-oriented plans in developing counterterrorism cooperation with regional countries. Additionally, several other steps can be taken. First, regular exchange of visits by defence officials and Track II dialogues for better understanding the requirements, needs and expectations of the regional countries from India is needed. Arguably, some steps towards this have been taken, more needs to be done. Second, steps such as weapons supply, training, capacity-building, lending of military expertise and regular consultation among officials and security agencies need to be taken in an institutionalised manner. Third, India can explore the possibilities of developing cooperation through de-radicalisation programmes wherein countries such as Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia have been able to attain a degree of success. This can help reduce the effectiveness of the ideological threats from Salafi-Jihadist groups and can enrich both sides in making deradicalisation programmes more effective. Fourth, India could explore the possibility of establishing institutionalised intelligence sharing measures to mitigate the threat of terrorism in the region while also including threats pertaining to issues such as cyber security and maritime security.

Fifth, joint counterterrorism cooperation with likeminded countries such as France, the United States, the UAE and Israel can be explored

given that these countries are also concerned about the spread of terrorism in the region and have been involved in counterterrorism cooperation with regional countries. Sixth, India should also explore working with regional and international multilateral organisations, such as the AU and MNJTF, in counterterrorism in the worst affected countries in North-West Africa. This can help in better understanding the regional requirements and channelising of resources. Collaboration with the AU and MNJTF can pave the way for greater cooperation with more countries in Africa. Sixth, India should explore the possibility of establishing institutionalised intelligence sharing measures to mitigate the threat of terrorism in the region. Finally, India can look to forge greater developmental partnership with the regional countries to be able to strike at one of the root causes of the rapid spread of terrorist groups, that is, economic deprivation and widespread poverty. These steps should be aimed at helping the regional countries develop capacity and resilience, maintain peace and stability and improve governance to defeat terrorism in all its forms and manifestations.

CONCLUSION

India has gradually been expanding and enhancing its cooperation and partnership with African countries. The focus of India's outreach in Africa is on economic and security cooperation. India has for long contributed to the security, stability and peace in different countries in Africa affected by conflicts by contributing to the UN peacekeeping missions and developing bilateral partnerships. Gradually, India has also engaged with some regional countries to help them in capacity-building, training and weapons supply to strengthen their defence, security and counterterrorism preparedness.

The Maghreb and Sahel regions in North-West Africa have become a major hub of international terrorism since the Arab Spring uprisings. Many international terrorist organisations, including Al-Qaeda and Daesh, and home-grown groups, such as Boko Haram and JNIM, have been creating havoc in the Lake Chad Basin, and other Maghreb and Sahel countries. Regional countries such as Libya, Algeria, Mali, Nigeria and Chad in addition to Burkina Faso, Ivory Coast, Morocco, Tunisia, Cameroon, Mauritania and Senegal have faced serious and intermittent threats from terrorism.

In so far as the Indian approach to counterterrorism cooperation in Maghreb and Sahel is concerned, the focus has been on greater conversation, discussion and dialogue to develop the necessary convergence on counterterrorism. The process, however, has been slow due to different

domestic and external factors. It is important to take steps and develop greater cooperation in both capacity-building and operational spheres. In addition to bilateral cooperation, India should look at forging multilateral cooperation with African and international organisations and India's regional and international partners to enhance counterterrorism cooperation in North-West Africa and defeating the tide of terrorism in the region.

NOTES

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