



Worsening Situation of Terrorism And Violent Extremism in the Sahel:

What More Could Be Done to Avoid Destabilisation of West Africa Coastal States?

Summary

The security situation in the Sahel remains fragile and characterized by incessant terrorist attacks, ethnic tensions, political fragility and rise in illicit economic activities. The last half-decade has seen a consistent surge in terrorist activities across many parts of the region. Terrorism incidents in the region increased more than threefold in 2023 when compared to 2022 attacks, while deaths resulting from terrorist attacks increased by over 68%.

In 2023, five of the ten most terrorism affected countries globally were recorded in Africa, of which four, namely Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, and Nigeria are in the Sahel.

Despite the worrying terrorism threat situation, it has not received the much-needed attention due in part to the region's repeated military coups and political turmoil.

The political instability has resulted in a regional and international focus on democratic transitions, electoral timetables, and constitutional rule, due to the apparent contagion effect of coups, while overlooking the rise of terrorist groups, which continue to gain ground and challenge the very existence of Sahelian countries, severely hampering developmental objectives of the affected states.

Indiscriminate use of terror, fear, and violence as tools employed by terrorist and violent extremist groups have left thousands of innocent civilians to suffer,

while millions of others are forced from their homes. Women and children in particular, continue to bear the brunt of insecurity, violence and growing inequality. The political instability, sanctions and its unintended consequences on Sahelian economies, growing use of community auto defence groups and private military companies, overlapping regionalism of multinational security cooperation initiatives, transnational organised crimes (TOC), climate change and transhumance challenges as well as the over-reliance on military kinetic approach are some of the identified factors sustaining the momentum of the terrorist groups. There is, therefore, the need to rethink Counter Terrorism (CT) approaches in the Sahel through a well-thought through collective approach, creativity, and the need to go beyond the existing efforts in proffering solutions to the crisis in the region, including promoting community grown alternative approaches. An international coordinated, concerted and collaborative approach, involving all relevant stakeholders at all levels of the response generation efforts are required. An initiative that seeks to engage the relevant authorities of the affected Sahel countries, particularly Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger to understand their CT needs and security priorities should be considered as an urgent action that could culminate into reversing the current deterioration of the terrorism and violent extremism phenomena. In this regard, the role that MNJTF of the Accra Initiative as a viable alternative, the African Standby Force (ASF) of the African Union (AU), and the ECOWAS standby Force could play within the principles of complementarity and subsidiarity must be vigorously pursued.

Human Security response approach should be considered as the new contract between the states and their citizens, which could form the basis of the concept of military operations and national security policy formulation and implementation.

In this regard, local development initiatives, particularly decentralisation,

devolution and development that creates community resilience must be vigorously pursued to serve as a lever for deradicalisation and preventing violent extremism. Finally, given that the killing of members of terrorist groups and their leaders have not yielded the desired results, Whole-of-Society approach including dialogue and negotiations, community local context-specific measures including tapping into the expertise of key community actors could be considered a viable alternative.

Introduction

The Sahel region, since the past five years, continues to experience steady expansion of terrorist and violent extremist threats which has not received the much-needed attention it deserves given the region's repeated military coups and political turmoil. The political instability has resulted in a regional and international focus on democratic transitions, electoral timetables, and constitutional rule, due to the apparent contagion effect of coups, while overlooking the rise of terrorist groups, which continue to gain ground and challenge the very existence of Sahelian countries. Whether electoral timetables should occupy the priority list of relevant actors, at a time when more territories are under terrorists, violent extremists, and militants' occupation, which raises legitimate concerns on the suitability for the organisation of any election under such security environment is yet to be thoroughly debated.

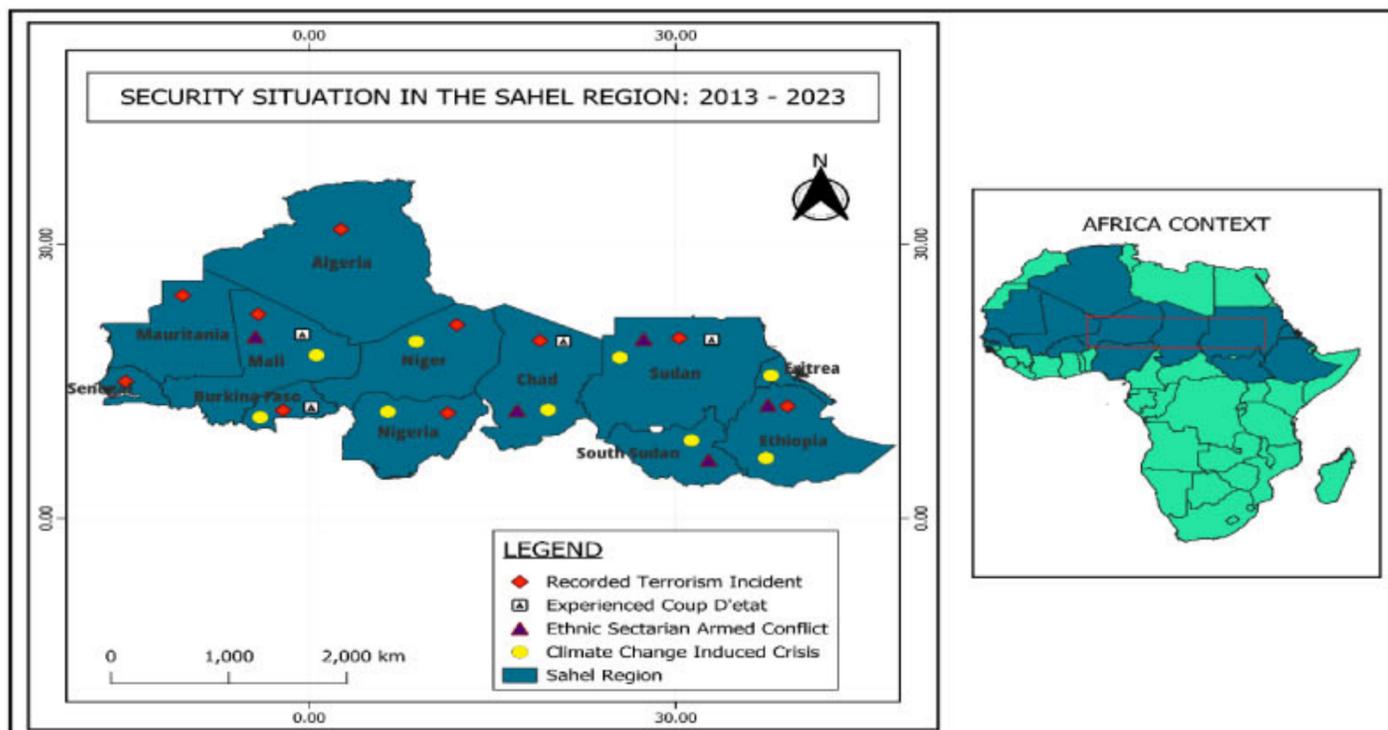


Figure 1: Map Showing the insecurity situation in the Sahel region

Terrorism and Violent Extremism in the Sahel is derived from multi-faceted and extremely diverse causal factors. The prevalence of weak institutions, porous borders, inadequately equipped security forces, historical grievances, and lack of economic opportunities have created conditions for extremist ideologies to grow and fester in many Sahel countries currently in the eye of the storm of violent extremism and terrorism. These causal factors have been worsened by governance challenges and local context specific grievances which have contributed to persistent radicalisation and recruitment into violent extremist groups.

Given the prevailing situation, the confidence of local communities reposed in state authorities in several countries facing terrorist threats is eroded, as governance deficits remain a primary vulnerability exploited by terrorist groups.

. In most cases, effort by governments to effectively counter activities of terrorist groups are considerably inhibited by the prevailing governance challenges, particularly the inability of governments in the region to extend governance beyond the state capital. Also, the inability of several Sahelian governments to provide effective security in several local communities and territories has given terrorist groups the leeway to exploit the deficit by controlling territories and making the Sahel increasingly more violent. Terrorists and violent extremists have taken advantage of the socio-economic, political vacuums as

well as local context specific grievances to expand beyond their previously known area of operation. For instance, in some local communities particularly within the Liptako-Gourma tri-border enclave, the basic need for survival and self-preservation has fostered a relationship of mutual support between the people and the terrorist groups. As a result, terrorist groups now control territories in several of the affected areas. In control of these territories, the groups run criminal and illicit economies in conjunction with transnational organized criminal (TOC) networks and the local population are made to benefit.

Given the precarious security situation in the Sahel, many initiatives have been previously undertaken to reverse the growing terrorism and violent extremism. Despite the several counter terrorism commitments by relevant actors, the violent extremism and terrorism threats persist and have remained potent. The proliferation of terrorists and other non-State armed groups, coupled with multiple vulnerabilities, are creating deteriorating security crisis in the region that poses a greater threat to the coastal states of the West Africa sub-region, the rest of Africa and even beyond.

Evidently, terrorist and violent extremist groups are tightening their deadly grip over the region and have extended their presence into the countries of the Gulf of Guinea .

The threats on coastal states have heightened and derived from the Central Sahel region States (Burkina

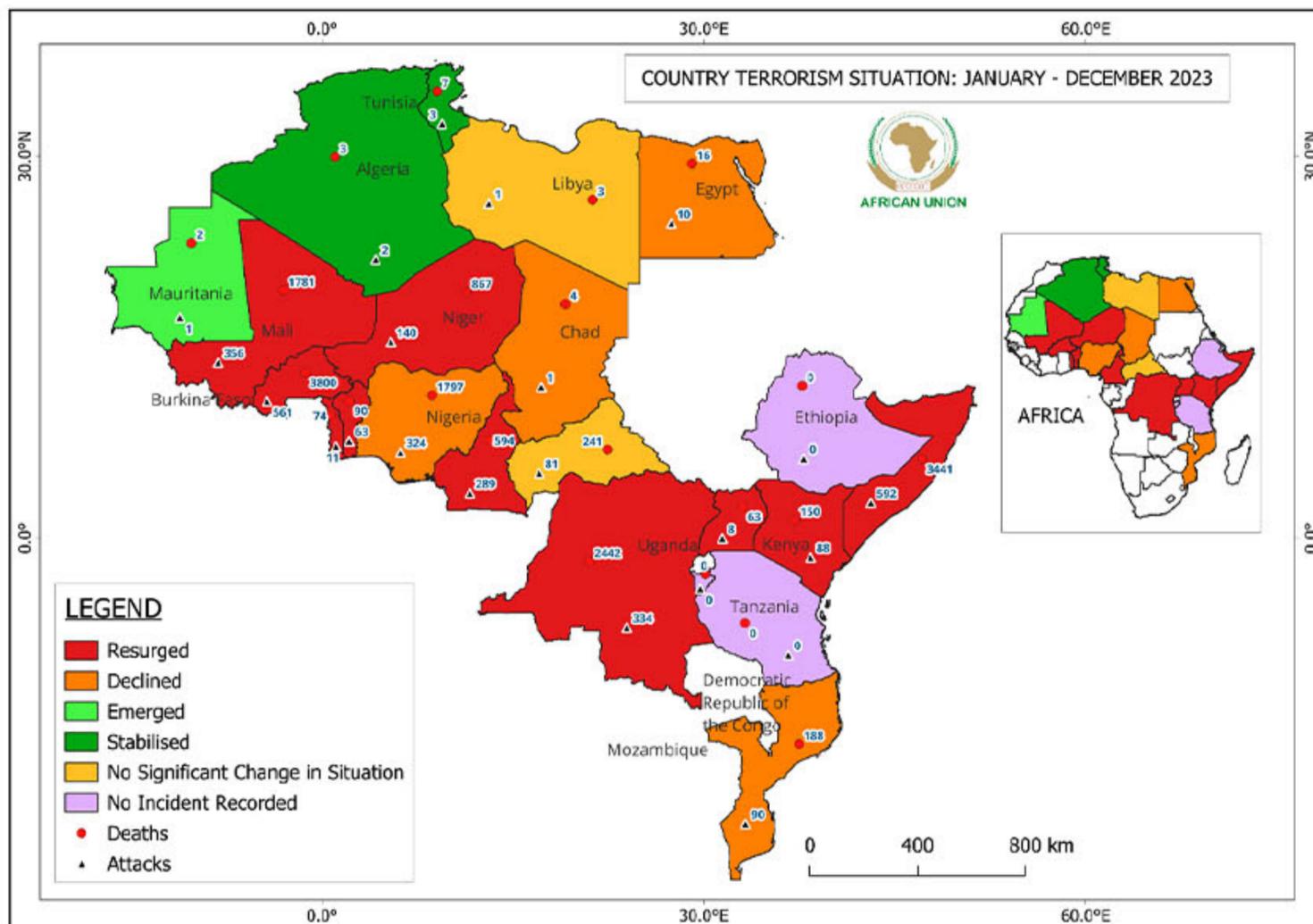


Figure 2: Map of Terrorism and Violent Extremism Situation in Africa for 2023 compared to the number of incidents recorded in 2022. Data Source: AUCTC Africa Terrorism Database, 2024.

Faso, Mali and Niger), as rising instability and deteriorating security situation have generated concerns among neighbouring West African states about the effects of regional spill over (See Figure 2).

Against this background, this policy paper explores urgent actions that could be implemented to reverse the current deteriorating security situation in the Sahel region. The paper is aimed at evaluating the current underlying factors festering the continuous development of terrorism and violent extremism in the region, and provide remedial policy action recommendations, if when implemented could ameliorate the current threat levels.

Terrorism and Violent Extremism Situation and Trends in the Sahel Region

The West African part of the Sahel region, particularly Central Sahel, have been significantly affected by insecurity and continue to witness persistent terrorist attacks.

This is a manifestation of the worsening security situation caused by the increasing terrorism and violent extremism in the region.

As recent as 2022 and 2023, there have been a spike in the number of attacks particularly by Jama'at Nustrat al-Islam wal-Muslimeen (JNIM) (consisting of Ansar Dine, Macina Liberation Front (FLM) or Katiba Macina, al-Mourabitoun, and the al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) or the Group for the Support of Islam and Moslems (GSIM) and Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) in

Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso. JNIM and ISGS, both Salafi-Jihadi terrorist groups affiliated to al Qaeda and IS (Da'esh), respectively, continue to dominate the terrorism landscape in the central Sahel area . While virtually pursuing similar and identical ideology to that of Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), the two groups continue to operate in Mali and across the border in both Burkina Faso and Niger. They have accomplices in two other terrorist groups, the Katiba Serma and Ansarul Islam which also operate in Burkina Faso.

Al Qaeda's affiliate group, Boko Haram and IS' affiliate group, ISWAP also continue to dominate the terrorism landscape in the Lake Chad Basin (LCB) area of the Sahel region. At the operational level, both groups continue to demonstrate considerable momentum, cohesion, capability and a will to face the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) in the latter's efforts to stabilize the region. While both groups continue to launch limited terrorist attacks in the South-East of Niger

(Diffa region) and South-Western Chad, their major areas of operation have recently been in the North-Eastern Nigerian State of Borno and Far-North and North Regions of Cameroon. As a result, the Sahel region is currently considered home to some of the world's fastest growing and most-deadly terrorist groups. Terrorist groups continue to wage violent campaigns in the region, with deaths in the Sahel accounting for 35% of global total of terrorism deaths in 2021, compared with just 1% in 2007 .

The terrorist groups in the Sahel have remained resolute both in intent and capability, with growing confidence and cohesion in the launching of devastating attacks on civilians, security forces, and critical infrastructure across the region (See Figure 3).

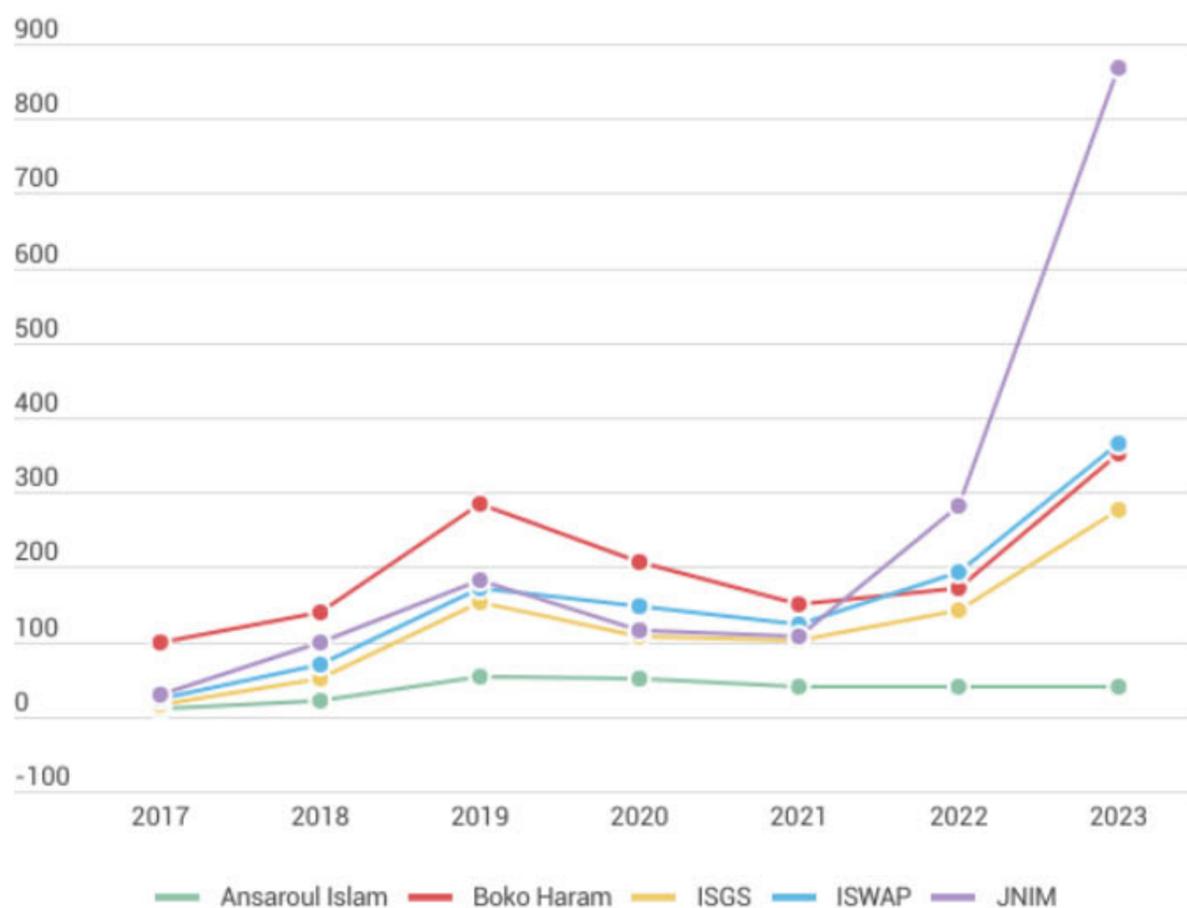


Figure 1: Figure 3. Terrorism Attack Trends by Active Terrorist Groups in the Sahel Region (2017-2023). Data Source: AUCTC Africa Terrorism Database, 2024.

The Africa Terrorism Database hosted by the African Union Counter Terrorism Centre (AUCTC) shows that from 1st January 2017 to 31st December 2023, the Sahel region recorded almost 6,500 terrorist attacks that resulted in about 10,000 injuries and approximately 36,000 deaths. The number of attacks represents 55% of all terrorist attacks recorded in Africa within the same period, while the deaths represent more than 60% of total deaths in Africa between 2017-2023. The historical data trend as shown in Figure 3, shows that deaths from terrorism reached their peak in 2020 in the Sahel and begun to decline. However, terrorist attacks and associated fatalities took a sharp nose-dive in 2022, recording over 52% increase in attacks and approximately 100% increase in associated fatalities when compared to 2021. Similarly, the data for 2023 shows continuous escalation of the threat in the Sahel. From January to December 2023, the AUCTC database

recorded 1,673 attacks and 8,840 deaths for the Sahelian countries. The number of attacks more than doubled while fatalities increased by over 68%, when compared to 2022. Indeed, when the historical data trend is compared, the rate of lethality in 2023 stands tall (See Figure). The incidents recorded over years, particularly in 2023, reveal that Violent Extremism and Terrorism situation in the Sahel shows no sign of improvement and is far from abating. Across the region, terrorist groups continue to exhibit a great capability of resilience and freedom of movement along their mobility corridors.

This has resulted in the maiming of the civilian population and caused a great deal of destructions to military installations, security forces and critical infrastructures.



Figure : Historical Data Trend of Terrorism and Violent Extremism Incidents Recorded in the Sahel Region from 2017 to 2022. Data Source: ACSRT Africa Terrorism Database, 2024

While many parts of the Sahel are engulfed in violent extremism and terrorism, attacks are mostly concentrated in some six identified theatres, four of which are concentrated in the Central Sahel. The theatre of concentration of terrorist activities includes Liptako-Gourma (Tri-Border areas), Central Mali, Northern Burkina Faso, South-East Niger, North-Eastern Nigeria, and Far North Cameroon. These identified zones encompass over 90 percent of violent extremist and terrorist activities in the Sahel region.

The Liptako-Gourma (see Figure 5) covers parts of central and northern regions of Mali (Mopti, Menaka and Gao), four regions of Burkina Faso (Sahel, North (Nord), NorthWest (Boucle du Mouhoun), and East (Est)) and a department of Niger (Tillabéri). Historically, the Liptako-Gourma area which is dominated by pastoralist populations has become the epicentre of violence in the Sahel region, covers parts of central and northern regions of Mali (Mopti, Menaka and Gao), four regions of Burkina Faso (Sahel, North (Nord), NorthWest (Boucle du Mouhoun), and East (Est)) and a department of Niger (Tillabéri). At least over 60 percent of terrorism incidents in the central Sahel area (Burkina Faso, Niger and Mali) occur in the Liptako-Gourma tri-border enclave. Several militant groups, including Ansaroul Islam, JNIM and ISGS operate in this enclave.

In Northern Burkina Faso, provinces such as Bam, Loroum, Namentenga, Sanmentenga, and Yatenga have become the centre of attractions to terrorist groups due to the significant gold deposits which the groups seek to control to generate resources for

their activities. For Central Mali, areas such as Bankass, Douentza, and Koro have become the epicentre of Amadou Koufa's Macina Liberation Front (MLF), an affiliate of JNIM from where attacks are staged and planned against other territories. This underscores the importance of Central Mali as a base and staging area for attacks into neighbouring zones. Similarly, the north-eastern Nigeria states of Borno, Yobe and Adamawa; the Far North and North Regions of Cameroon and the South-East region (Diffa) of Niger could be conveniently classified as the operational corridors of Boko Haram and its breakaway group ISWAP. Understanding the features shaping each of these respective zones provides insights into the customized approaches needed to reverse the increasing trends of terrorism and violent extremism in the Sahel.

The propagation Effects of Terrorism Spillover from the Central Sahel into West Africa Coastal States

The terrorism threat level and spill over into coastal West Africa have heightened and continue to deteriorate.

The recent contagion of terrorism and violent extremism from the Central Sahel region into the countries on the coast of Gulf of Guinea has become increasingly worrying, given that the sub-region was once considered relatively peaceful and stable. Whilst focus is centered on the Sahel region, rising instability and the deteriorating security situation in the Sahel have generated concerns among

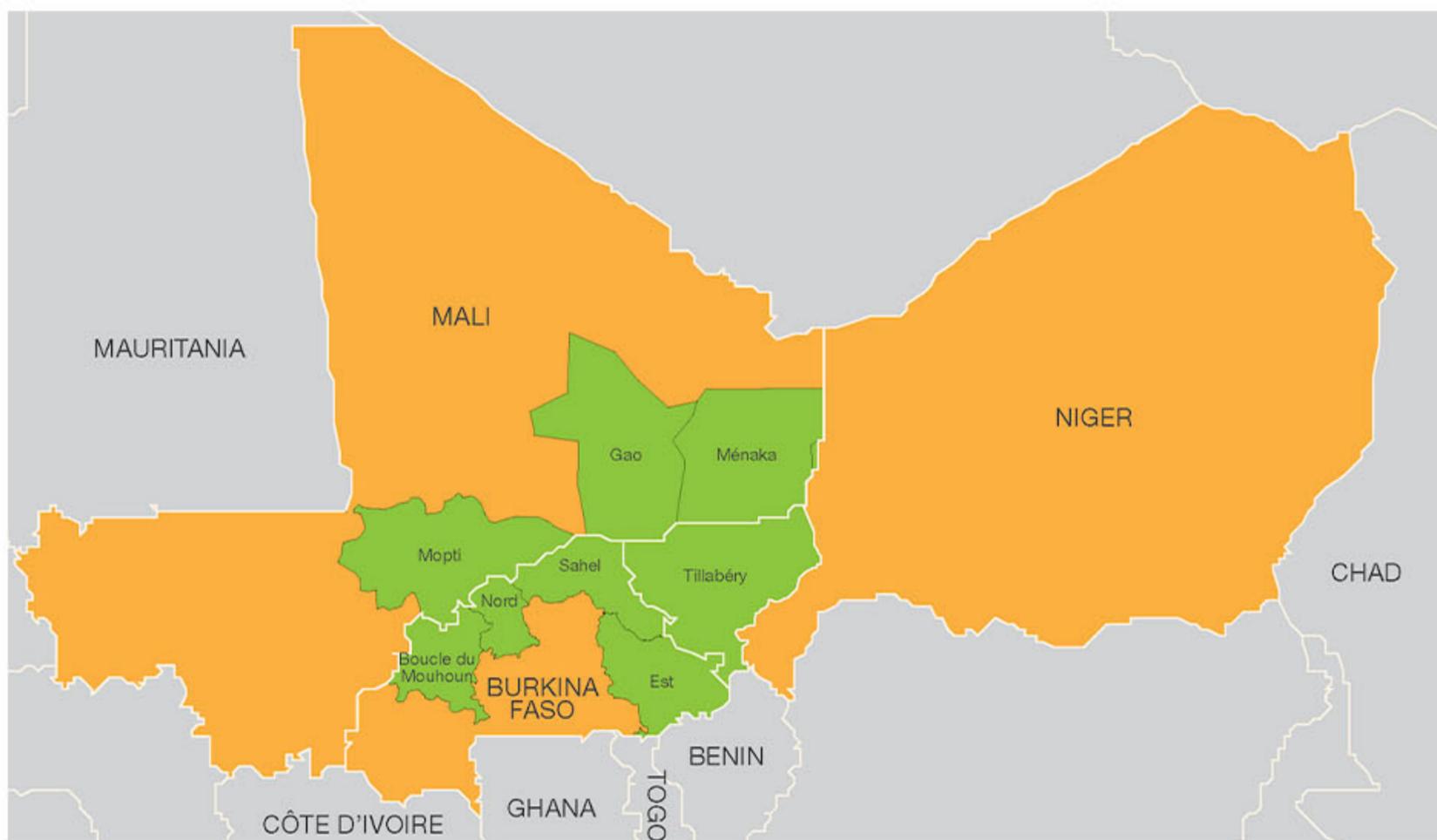


Figure 5: Map Showing the Liptako-Gourma Tri-Border Region in the Sahel (Areas indicated in green colours are the Liptako-Gourma enclave). Source: Assanvo, 2019 .

neighbouring West African states about the domino effects on littoral states. Violent attacks by militants aligned to the ISGS and JNIM continue to expand their tentacles towards the coastal states of West Africa . Already, Benin and Togo are presently experiencing attacks, Cote d'Ivoire recorded its last attack in January 2022, and Ghana continue to face increasing high-risk levels of possible attacks along its frontier with Burkina Faso.

The deteriorating security situation in Burkina Faso continues to trigger militant encroachment southwards to the coastal States of West Africa , particularly in the Northern parts of Benin and Togo. Whereas Poni, a district in Burkina Faso that borders Cote d'Ivoire has witnessed increased attacks, Koulpelogo province which is closer to the frontiers of Ghana and Togo, also continue to witness increasing attacks. Ghana , Cote d'Ivoire and Togo have experienced

increased number of displaced persons fleeing terrorist attacks and counter terrorism operations in Burkina Faso. Also, Senegal and Guinea also face critical threats along their borders with Mali. In February and March 2024, JNIM conducted several attacks along the Guinea border and near the Malian capital, Bamako. JNIM has attacked Malian security forces several times within some few miles of the capital along Mali's border with Guinea .

Since the first incidents in 2019 and 2021 in northern Benin and Togo, respectively, insurgents have expanded from targeting defence forces to planting IED's on roads, and assaulting civilians . Towards mid-2022, terrorist groups have extended their activities to the Eastern border region of Burkina Faso along the frontiers with Togo. For instance, between 10 and 11 May 2022, suspected JNIM militants attacked a Togolese military outpost located in Kpekpakandi within the

however, presents some selected emerging factors shaping and sustaining the terrorism threats in the Sahel in recent times.

The risks and spread of violent extremism in the Sahel in recent times have been exacerbated by the resurgence in Unconstitutional Changes in Governments (UCG).

The surge in UCG in the Sahel region is considered probable factors that have weakened the fight against violent extremism and terrorism in the region. In August 2020 and May 2021, Mali experienced double coup d'états carried out by Colonel Assimi Goita, leading to the overthrow of President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita (IBK) and Transitional President Bah N'Daw, respectively. In Chad, Mahamat Deby was installed as the transitional President following the death of his father Idris Deby in violation of the constitution of Chad. In Burkina Faso, a coup by Lieutenant Colonel Paul-Henri Damiba resulted in the overthrow of Roch Marc Christian Kabore in January 2022. Burkina Faso suffered its second coup in 2022 eight months after the first, when Captain Ibrahim Traoré overthrew Lieutenant Colonel Paul-Henri Sandaogo Damiba, and declared himself head of state on September 30, 2022. Traoré justified his seizure of power on Burkina Faso's deteriorating security situation. In Niger, an attempted coup in March 2021 was thwarted by presidential guards and soldiers, after a military unit detained President-elect

Mohamed Bazoum inside the presidential palace in the capital, Niamey two days before his inauguration. Two years later, an Elite Guard led by General Abdourahamane Tiani seized the presidential palace and announced the overthrow of President Mohamed Bazoum on 26 July 2023. Ominously, all the countries affected by the coups in the Sahel are at the center in the fight against terrorism and violent extremism. The coups have indirectly changed the political dynamics of the above-mentioned Sahelian countries, making the future of counter terrorism in the region uncertain, as attention of transitional governments continue to shift towards political security and power consolidation. What is interesting to ask is, "Given the current level of insecurity in the Sahel, Could the Transitional Leaders Achieve Counter Terrorism Successes without Political Security?". An efficient and convincing answer to the question remains key to understanding the political, social, psychological, and military dynamics shaping the CT responses and initiatives in the Sahel Region.

The political instability caused by the UCG in the Sahel has invariably contributed to the vulnerabilities of states and in most cases occasioned the escalation of terrorism and violent extremism. Following the coups, dynamics of geopolitical situation in the Sahel has been altered. Unfettered geopolitical competition and subtle proxy war among superpowers appears to be shaping the regional security complexes in the Sahel. The withdrawal of French Operation Barkhane and European Union Takuba forces from Burkina Faso, Niger and Mali created a security vacuum which further escalated the security situation.

The withdrawal follows a breakdown in diplomatic relations and tense exchanges as public patience wanes after nearly a decade of counterinsurgency operations against al-Qaeda and Islamic State group militants. The alleged deployment of Wagner Forces, rebranded Africa Corps in some Central Sahel States as well as delay in transition to democratic governance remain the key issues that have worsened diplomatic relations between Western Superpowers and some Sahel States. Amidst the deteriorating security situation, the immediate end of United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA); and the near collapse of the G5 Sahel Force have further compounded the regional security complexes in the Sahel.

Given the political uncertainties, terrorist groups with strongholds have taken advantage to expand their activities and now carry out devastating attacks aimed at destabilizing a number of Sahel countries in the eye of the storm of Violent Extremism and terrorism.

Undoubtedly, the imposition of sanctions on central Sahelian countries following the UCG weakened the capacity of Central Sahel States to fight terrorism. Countries in the Sahel had their economies ransacked by the double effects of COVID-19 and the Russia-Ukraine war. While on the

verge of recovery, coups took place and economic sanctions imposed on Mali and Niger, further causing socio-economic challenges and weakening their already fragile economy. The sanctions, which were meant to force the military leaders to return to civilian rule, rather compounded the humanitarian conditions in the region, making it difficult for states to provide basic services to the larger populations. Cross-border trade was halted, and foreign development partners paused aid assistance. The sanctions and their unintended consequences worsened the plight of citizens, impoverishing the people and causing businesses to shut down due to lack of cross-border activities and high inflation among many others. As the theory of relative deprivation posits, when people feel they are being deprived of something considered essential in their society (e.g. basic needs such as food, money, rights, political voice, status), they are likely to organize or join social movements dedicated to obtaining the things of which they have been deprived of. Most often than not, these social movements in most cases are illicit and violent in their modus operandi. In general, the negative effects of the sanctions created a leeway for violent extremist and terrorist groups propaganda, radicalisation and recruitment in local communities to thrive and further entrenched their operations in the area of influence while expanding towards coastal states.

Terrorism financing is considered the oxygen of the threats of terrorism and violent extremism. Key to the level of momentum being exhibited by the terrorist groups are sustained level terrorism financing, money laundering

linked to terrorism activities, transnational organised crimes (TOC) and its nexus with terrorism, and other illicit economies which have created conditions for violent extremism to grow and fester in many Sahel countries. Terrorist and violent extremist groups need to generate funds to cover operational costs associated with actual terrorist attacks, including purchasing weapons, intelligence gathering, training, transportation, and material costs. Despite the measures instituted to cut financial and logistical flow to terrorists, the groups continue to have access to huge sources of financing to carry out their operations. Terrorists control large territories, recruit more fighters, and engage in sophisticated attacks. This requires huge financial resources, leading to the reliance on TOC networks and other illicit economies to fund their ambitions and operations. It is observed that the groups tend to link up with TOC networks to control territories within the mobility corridors. In control of national territories, terrorist groups run criminal economies in conjunction with highly organised TOC network syndicates and inhabitants in local communities become beneficiaries of such criminal enterprises. Hence, the local population have become sympathetic to the cause of terrorist groups in several areas in the Sahel.

TOC activities including illicit firearms trafficking, drugs trafficking, human trafficking, fuel trafficking, cattle rustling, kidnapping for ransom, illicit trade in natural resources, taxation and extortion, illegal artisanal gold mining, as well as trafficking in persons and migrants appear to be a

major source of resilience, resurgence, and sustaining momentum for terrorists in the Sahel. The goal is to take care of their troops, maintain operational capabilities and influence. Linking up with TOC network traffickers facilitates terrorist groups' procurement of consumable goods like food and medicine as well as operational means including arms, ammunition, and fuel. The issue of TOC network groups is at the bottom of many terrorist acts that continue to be committed in many parts of the region. While the links between terrorist groups and TOC network groups may ordinarily be considered opportunistic, this nexus is nonetheless the cause of great concern as it provides terrorist groups with the badly needed funding.

Another factor shaping the dynamics of terrorism and violent extremism in the Sahel is Climate Change vulnerabilities and its attendant transhumance challenges.

Climate change has impacted the route and calendars of nomadic herders throughout the Sahel threatening the peaceful cohabitation of local communities as competition to access natural sources fuels violence and forced displacements.

The security crisis has disrupted pastoral activities in the Liptako-Gourma area, triggering massive displacement of pastoralists to peri-urban areas. Also, the climate dynamics in the Sahel means that

transhumance activities have increased as the movement of herders and their livestock from areas of scarcity to available pasture and water, usually on a seasonal basis - is particularly important for those with larger herds of livestock. As a result, violent conflicts involving pastoralists have escalated in parts of the Sahel in recent years, claiming thousands of lives across the region. These conflicts are primarily driven by a competition for land, water and forage, but there are also political and socio-economic factors involved. They often take the form of clashes between herders and farmers, impacting human, national and regional security. There have been instances whereby pastoralists within the theater of terrorism in the Sahel have been labeled terrorists by farmers and local communities, often leading to retaliatory attacks. Given the persecution faced by the pastoralists, some have had to seek refuge in the bosom of terrorist groups for protection of their lives and livestock, due to the lack of presence of state security actors to safeguard their lives and properties.

The continued use of mercenaries and private military companies (PMCs) both of which are illegal from the viewpoint of the 1977 OAU Convention for the Elimination of Mercenarism in Africa, volunteer fighters, pro-government militias and the arming of such ad-hoc NAGs are alarming. This situation has shifted the military and security casualties to the self-defense militias. This is the crux of the increasing attacks and deaths in the Sahel region, as terrorist groups launch devastating confrontational attacks against such militias and

their duty posts. For instance, the Volunteer for the Defense of the Homeland (VDP), a self-defense militia in Burkina Faso, formed in 2020 by then President Christian Roch Kabore now has an estimated 100,000 fighters fighting alongside traditional security set ups. The VDP has become the fourth-most active armed actor in Burkina Faso after JNIM, the military, and ISGS.

The resort to arming non-state armed groups (self-defense militia groups) represents a clear step toward a militarization of society in which the lines between civilians and combatants are blurred, and identities are increasingly weaponized.

The noncompliance of international human rights laws (IHRL), international humanitarian laws (IHL), and rule of laws remains a major setback with the involvement of community defense groups in the fight against terrorism and violent extremism. While the deployment of non-conventional military forces could prove helpful in the interim, the future implication in terms of Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) of fighters could be challenging.

Conclusion and Recommendations on the Way Forward

The Sahel region is witnessing a surge in the activities of violent extremist groups across many parts of the

region, but the threats have not received the much-needed attention it deserves due in part to the region's repeated military coups and political turmoil. The political instability has resulted in a regional and international focus on democratic transitions, electoral timetables, and constitutional rule, due to the apparent contagion effect of coups, while overlooking the rise of terrorist groups, which continue to gain ground and challenge the very existence of Sahelian countries.

The Sahel has become the global epicenter of terrorism and violent extremism (TVE) activities. The TVE threat is setting in motion a dramatic reversal of governance and democratic gains and threatening the very existence of states and citizens. The widespread fatalities and casualties caused by the TVE phenomenon as well as the displacement of thousands of people have created situations of pronounced and critical humanitarian need.

This policy paper has highlighted widespread vulnerabilities sustaining the momentum of violent extremism and terrorism in the Sahel region. Several emerging mutating factors are observed to be sustaining the momentum of terrorist groups across the region. Addressing the current level of the threats and vulnerabilities will require nuanced responses and approaches that could culminate into defeating violent extremist and terrorist groups in the region. The situation calls for reassessment of the counter terrorism response generation efforts as to whether it is adequately delivering and yielding the desired results. While counter

terrorism operations across the entire Sahel belt particularly in the Lake Chad Basin area have weakened and degraded capacities of groups such as Boko Haram and ISWAP, the sources of resilience and resurgence of the groups operating in the Liptako-Gourma, especially JNIM and ISGS are yet to be broken. This brings to the fore the multifaceted nature of the threats. Reversing the ongoing threats require recalibration, reassessment, and re-strategizing the counter terrorism response generation efforts. Given the circumstances, one would ask "What More Could Be Done by the relevant actors?" including the States concerned, ECOWAS, AU, UN, and the international community. It is against this background that urgent actions are required to reverse the current growing trend, and to avoid imminent destabilisation of the countries along the coast of the Gulf of Guinea. To achieve this, the following policy actionable oriented recommendations are made:

- Separating Political and Democratic Governance Transition at the Strategic Level from Security Assistance and Support from the Tactical and Operational Levels: Sahelian countries require help and assistance. Central Sahel States (Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger) must be assisted to avoid further destabilisation of the entire coast of West Africa. This brings to the fore, the need to separate political transitional processes at the strategic and policy levels from security assistance and counter terrorism at the tactical and operational levels. This is because, electoral timetables cannot occupy the priority list of relevant actors, at a time when more territories are

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the priority list of relevant actors, at a time when more territories are under terrorists, violent extremists, and militants' occupation, which raises legitimate concerns on the suitability for the organisation of any election under such security environment. The credibility of any such possible elections is yet to be thoroughly debated. What is however clear is that the two processes cannot be mixed.

- **An international coordinated, concerted and collaborative approach, involving all relevant stakeholders at all levels of the response generation efforts are required:**

The transnational nature of the threat has shown the need for a multidimensional response based on increased cooperation among Sahelian countries with the support of their regional and international partners. An initiative that seeks to engage the relevant authorities of the affected Sahel countries, particularly Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger to understand their CT needs and security priorities should be considered an urgent action that could culminate into reversing the current deterioration of the terrorism and violent extremism phenomena in the Sahel Region. The approach cannot be for Sahelian countries to choose between international partners. The state of events requires international development partners to work side by side in a collaborative and cooperative environment that delivers a synergised and harmonised

response. If this is not done, the ramification of the threat would be felt far beyond the Sahel and Africa.

- **African-Led Counter Terrorism Deployments anchored on the principles of complementarity and subsidiarity:**

There is the need to rethink CT approaches in the Sahel through a well-thought through collective approach, show creativity, and go beyond the existing efforts. In this regard, the role that the African Standby Force (ASF) of the AU, the ECOWAS standby Force, and the MNJTF of the Accra Initiative as viable alternatives could play within the principles of complementarity and subsidiarity must be vigorously discussed and pursued. This could be the basis of asking countries to withdraw self-defence militias and mercenaries that have become key actors in the escalation of conflicts in the Sahel region. Any such initiatives must be accompanied by sustainable, accessible, and predictable funding. The overall effect is that locally led solutions devised by key stakeholders in the Sahelian countries with technical support of African experts including the African Union Counter Terrorism Centre (AUCTC) should be considered the most effective ways to create enduring peace, security, and stability in the Sahel.

- **Local and Community Development as a lever for deradicalization:**

Bullets and Guns will continue to kill suspected terrorists, but local development will kill terrorism. The

underlying root causes of violent extremism and terrorism, include among other things, lack of socioeconomic development particularly in local communities where the risk of recruitments into violent extremist groups are prevalent. Deliberate commitment on the part of political elite to address the basic needs and welfare of their people could considerably reduce the level of vulnerabilities in local communities. In this regard, local development initiatives, particularly decentralisation, devolution and development that creates community resilience must be vigorously pursued to carve the realisation of vulnerable communities and as a lever for deradicalisation and preventing violent extremism.

- **Human Security as a new contract between the States and Citizens:**

While the kinetic militaristic approach could prove useful, evidence shows it is not sufficient, and in most cases worsening the situation and must therefore, be complemented with a human security approach that addresses the multitude of vulnerabilities facing local population across different sectors through a people-centred lens. Therefore, Human Security response approach should be considered as the new contract between the states and their citizens and forms the basis of concept of military operations and national security policy formulation and implementation. Also, given that the killing of members of terrorist groups and

their leaders have not yielded the desired results, a Whole-of-Government and Whole-of-Society approach including dialogue and negotiations with non-state armed groups (NAGs) tapping into the expertise of key community actors could be considered a viable alternative for addressing the threats. In this regard, compendium of best practices and guidelines on effective engagement with NAGs is recommended to guide Sahel Countries.

- **Building Community Resilience, Institutionalizing Local Early Warning Mechanisms and Peace Infrastructures:**

The dynamics of terrorist activities have heightened the relevance of community engagement and awareness on terrorism and violent extremism. Cases of terrorist engaging with local communities undetected, and in the process winning the hearts and minds of local population aided terrorist attacks in many parts of the Sahel region. In many local communities, the local population have become sympathetic to the cause of extremist groups for varied reasons including the lack of trust between security forces and the citizenry as well as complete disregard for human rights during counter terrorism operation by state actors. These factors and others have eroded the confidence of local communities in their government and have driven them towards violent extremist groups. Therefore, building community resilience through the involvement



of local community leaders, women and youth groups could facilitate trust and confidence building measures. Institutionalization of local early warning mechanisms and existences of workable peace infrastructure capable of predicting violence is a sine quo non detecting and disrupting terrorist attacks. This

could be complemented with a creeping ground implementation of a well thought through stakeholders-based initiatives that assures justice, protection, inclusion, education, and the provision of social amenities in order to win the hearts and minds of the local communities.

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