Intellectual Discourse

Special Issue on

The Intersection of Theory, Identity, and Security in PCVE (Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism)

Intellectual Discourse

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Contents

Transliteration Table: Consonants

Arabic	Roman		Arabic	Roman
ب	b		ط	ṭ
ت	t		ظ	ẓ
ث	th		ع	'
ج	j		غ	gh
ح	ḥ		ف	f
خ	kh		ق	q
د	d		ك	k
ذ	dh		ل	l
ر	r		م	m
ز	z		ن	n
س	s		ه	h
ش	sh		و	w
ص	ṣ		ء	'
ض	ḍ		ي	y

Transliteration Table: Vowels and Diphthongs

Arabic	Roman		Arabic	Roman
◌َ	a		◌َا، ◌َى	an
◌ُ	u		◌ُّو	un
◌ِ	i		◌ِّي	in
◌َا، ◌َ، ◌َى،	ā		◌َوْ	aw
◌ُو	ū		◌َيْ	ay
◌ِي	ī		◌ُّو	uww, ū (in final position)
			◌ِّي	iyy, ī (in final position)

Source: ROTAS Transliteration Kit: http://rotas.iium.edu.my

Terrorism in the Sahel: Beyond Border Complexities and Building Resilience

Ramzi Bendebka[*]

Abstract: This research addresses the complexity of Sahel terrorism and its regional and global effects. The paper focuses on the following questions: What are the multifaceted dimensions through which terrorism in al-Sahil influences the region? Furthermore, how do regional and international actors influence and shape the dynamics of terrorism in this region? By delving deeper into these inquiries, this paper aims to shed light on the complex nature of terrorism in the al-Sahil region, considering its impact dimensions and the various influences it encounters from both regional and international actors. Concerning the findings, first, the problem of terrorism is indeed a much larger shady business in which various regional and international actors are still involved and benefiting from its notoriety. States, regimes, and transnational interests within and beyond the Sahel region are implicated in confabulating never-ending terror. Second, terrorism's obscure nature is reflected in the international practice of the possibility of the enemy today being a friend tomorrow and vice versa. Third, insecurity in al-Saharan borders is not an issue of proximity to the Sahara but the ramifications of the ongoing politics of surrogate violence perpetrated in the pursuit of wealth and power. The research concluded that facing this compound problem necessitates a comprehensive strategy to address socio-political and economic causes and promote interregional and international cooperation.

Keywords: The Sahel, Terrorism, security, international intervention, regional actors.

Abstrak: Penyelidikan ini menangani kerumitan isu keganasan di wilayah Sahil dan kesan serantau dan globalnya. Kertas kerja ini memberi tumpuan kepada soalan-soalan berikut: Apakah dimensi pelbagai rupa yang mempengaruhi

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keganasan di wilayah Sahil? Bagaimana pula aktor serantau dan antarabangsa mempengaruhi dan membentuk dinamik keganasan di rantau ini? Dengan mendalami pertanyaan ini, kertas kerja ini bertujuan untuk menjelaskan sifat kompleks keganasan di rantau al-Sahil, dengan mengambil kira dimensi impaknya dan pelbagai pengaruh yang dihadapinya daripada kedua-dua aktor serantau dan antarabangsa. Penemuan kajian menunjukkan, pertama, masalah keganasan sememangnya merupakan isu yang jauh lebih besar di mana pelbagai aktor serantau dan antarabangsa masih terlibat dan mendapat manfaat daripada reputasi burknya. Negara, rejim dan kepentingan transnasional di dalam dan di luar wilayah Sahil terlibat dalam menyatukan keganasan yang tidak berkesudahan. Kedua, sifat kabur keganasan dicerminkan dalam amalan antarabangsa tentang kemungkinan musuh hari ini menjadi kawan esok dan begitu juga sebaliknya. Ketiga, isu sekuriti di sempadan Sahara bukanlah kerana isu kedekatan dengan Sahara tetapi kesan daripada politik berterusan keganasan proksi yang dilakukan dalam mengejar kekayaan dan kuasa. Penyelidikan menyimpulkan bahawa menghadapi masalah kompaun ini memerlukan strategi yang komprehensif untuk menangani punca sosio-politik dan ekonomi dan menggalakkan kerjasama antara wilayah dan antarabangsa.

Kata kunci: wilayah Sahil, keganasan, keselamatan, campur tangan antarabangsa, aktor serantau.

Introduction

The study of terrorism in the Sahel is a matter of significant concern, as the region is a hotspot of both homegrown terrorism and external threats to the world. The geographical features of the Sahel, such as its vast open spaces and poorly protected borders, enable criminals, terror groups, and armed groups to use the region as a route for illegal migration and drug trafficking (Aning & Amedzrator, 2014; Kfir, 2018; Çonkar, 2020). Such dynamics affect the region, neighbouring countries, and the world. It is therefore important to have a basic understanding of terrorism in this region to effectively intervene in the social, political, and economic causes of this vice and evolve practical, fundamental, and sustainable solutions that address its multifaceted ramifications (Bamidele, 2020).

The activities of other international groups, such as Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), clearly link terrorism in the Sahel to global terrorism (Apau, & Banunle, 2019; Nsaibia & Weiss, 2020). These groups keep links

with international structures for the purpose of resource sharing, idea dissemination, and synchronisation of operations. Additionally, the Sahel region has attracted the interest of external players, such as France and the United States, who are conducting counterterrorism operations, thereby broadening the scope and global nature of the conflict. This interaction places the Sahel, both regionally and internationally, as a security threat region (Bala & Tar, 2021).

From the Atlantic Ocean in the west to the Red Sea in the east, over 150 million people live across some ten countries within its more than 5000 km length. This study focuses especially on Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, and Mauritania as well as Chad (the United Nations, 2018). According to Dieng (2021), Sahelians experience different degrees of humanitarian challenges, including armed conflicts and violent extremism in these regions. The states of the Sahel region have been experiencing interlocking political and security crises as a result of the spread of cross-border armed terrorist groups and organised criminal gangs (drugs, weapons, and human trafficking) in that harsh desert region, which provides them with immunity and concealing the attention of their followers from the forces of the governments of that region (Adeyemi et al., 2015, p. 34; Muhammed, 2023).

 Moreover, Clapham (1996, p. 137) argued that superpowers have tried to support the governments of this part of Africa under cover of brilliant concepts for a long time ago, such as assistance in nation-building, the spread of freedom and equality, and the establishment of good governance for development, which is the salvation of the peoples of the region (Claphan, 1996). But these Western "delusional" principles have taken a reverse course in that region, prompting the emergence of an entire generation represented by media, political, military, and civil society organisations to express their unequivocal rejection of the politics of superiority, influence, and domination of international forces (Ilo, 2006, p. 17; the United Nations, 2018, p. 12). For example, there is increasing hostility towards France and its influence in the Sahel and Maghreb regions because of its colonial policy towards those States (Zoubir, 2020; Mansour, 2022).

Adding to the above matters, the western part of the African coast is known for its ethnic, religious, and sectarian diversity, its social and tribal fabric, and a large population density, the majority of which are

traditional farmers, as well as their humiliation of grazing livestock in extremely difficult environmental environments and in a complex social environment (Du Toit, 2019, p. 3). With security instability and sustained political tension, poverty, and the lack of prospects for a better life for young people in the Sahelo-African States, all of this.

These factors have resulted in interlocking crises, which have become a source of great concern to the governments of the Maghreb countries, such as illegal immigration and its repercussions on the neighbouring countries of the Maghreb and the countries of the South European Union, which fear a new crisis and tension in the event that the Niger's crisis is not managed realistically (Nsaibia & Weiss, 2020; Andolfatto, 2021; Attah et al., 2021; Bala & Tar, 2021; Kohnert, 2022). Civilian elites continue to be held hostage to the dependence and neglect of the evils of dictatorships and exploit them by the traditional international and regional forces whose influence in the region has begun to fade, leaving the peoples of the region in extreme poverty (Madubuegwu et al., 2021). These factors are the main source of illegal migration, which transforms this social variable in these African countries into threats to the security of the Maghreb countries from the land borders that link Algeria and Libya directly with Niger and Algeria and Mauritania with Mali (Nagar & Nagar, 2022; Olech, 2023). Mauritania, which has no direct borders with Niger, has so far opted for neutrality and disassociation vis-à-vis the current crisis in Niger (Malakooti, 2020; Rizk, 2024).

Terrorism in the Sahel is unique because it operates in one of the poorest regions of the world with weak governance structures and environmental stressors. The Sahel's primary distinction from other regions, where ideological or political goals primarily drive terrorism, lies in its focus on socioeconomic issues, tribalism, and the exploitation of state vulnerability (Hansen, 2019: pp. 41-42). Given these considerations, we can view the Sahel as a unique context that deviates from both purely domestic and purely global settings, necessitating the serious consideration of specific factors when studying and combating modern terrorism.

The paper is developed into three main steps. The first step deals with the threat of terrorism and analyses the terrorist attacks that have hit al-Sahel countries over the past years. The second step presents some of the regional and international responses to the crisis in the

region. It shows the immense detrimental impact of these interventions on the already shaky states of the Sahel. The concluding step focuses more on the outcomes of the situation in al-Sahel on the region and neighbouring countries. Negative regional and international impacts are based on profound developments during and after the Tuareg rebellions were dealt with. The paper concludes by verifying possible means for Sahelian states to autonomously reclaim control over their territory or to at least autonomously set the difference between their relations with foreign allies and regional partners on the one hand and their choices of making war against their own citizens on the other hand.

Literature Review

The literature shows that the interaction and interconnection of social and political crises, insecurity, and interventionist counterterrorism characterises terrorism in the Sahel. The literature also has demonstrated that weak governance, a poor economy, and inter-border contexts provide an easy environment for extremist groups, while external factors such as international organisations and major powers complicate the situation with their own motives and geopolitical agendas. It shows that the nature of terrorism in the region has continuously transformed and is a product of both internal conditions, including ethnic and socio-economic factors, and the external influences of extremist groups like Al Qaida and ISIS. Many researchers have attempted to explain how local and regional actors may respond to the transnational dimensions of terrorism without recreating dependencies or threatening sovereignty. Yet this question remains largely unanswered.

Also, Destabilising Sahel countries could have negative spill-over effects on their neighbours and the sub-region (Zelin & Cahn, 2023). Today, governments in the region are confronted not with a single threat but with a complex web of intertwined menaces. Second and connected to the first concern, pressures from a number of regional and local or national actors, as well as international powers, have been increasing, thus making it difficult for national authorities to steer clear from potential regional and international tides, influencing their security policies and measures (Moussa, 2021). Third and directly related to the above-mentioned matters, a wide variety of domestic security issues are stunting the ability of possibly interested governments to handle them efficiently and resolutely, thereby increasing the danger of unwanted

escalation (Lofkrantz, 2023). This review contextualises terrorism in the Sahel starting with an overview of the region, governance, and regional resilience, with the objectives of understanding the various facets of the problem as well as showing how the pathways towards sustainable resolution can be made clear.

Overview of the Region

This overview of the dynamics pertaining to the al-Sahel area will effectively establish the necessary context for the study at hand. To accomplish this objective, this portion will briefly delve into the geographical, political, and socio-economic elements constituting the region, thus forming the groundwork upon which the security dynamics are intricately intertwined.

The Sahel region, also known as the Sahel belt, is a vast area in West Africa, stretching from the southern edge of the Sahara Desert from Senegal in the West to Eritrea and the Horn of Africa in the East. It encompasses several countries in Central Africa, including Chad, Mali, Niger, and Sudan. It is worth mentioning that parts of Nigeria, Cameroon, Mauritania, and other neighbouring countries are also connected to the Lake Chad basin, which adds further complexity to the region's composition. From another perspective, the Sahel belt can be considered to extend across the Maghreb region and into the expansive Lake Chad basin. In terms of size, the Sahel belt covers a vast surface area that is astonishingly larger than the entirety of the European Union (EU) (Sabban, 2020; Hecan & Farhaoui, 2021; al-Sabbagh et al., 2024).
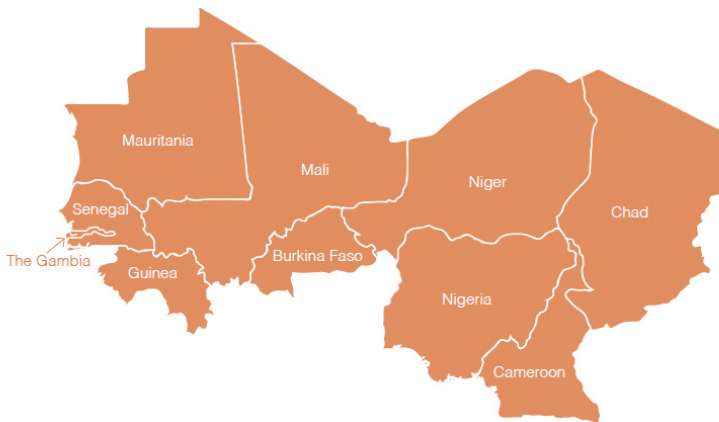

Figure (1) The African Sahel Countries (The United Nations, 2018).

It is important to note that a significant portion of the Sahel's population is concentrated around the Nile Valley, which serves as a vital lifeline for many communities in the region (Hecan & Farhaoui, 2021; Roushdy, 2023). While a conglomerate desert landscape primarily dominates the Sahel belt, there are also pockets of contrasting environments, such as the Bar-El-Ghazal clay lands, including the remarkable Southern Sudan region now. These diverse geographical features contribute to the region's rich tapestry of natural beauty and environmental variations (Çonkar, 2020). The political boundaries within the Sahel belt are largely remnants of colonial powers' influence; yet they hold vital significance in the region's political dynamics (Irvine, 1978). Each country within the Sahel has experienced similar challenges, including political tensions, terrorism, corruption, lack of transparency, and transboundary trade issues (Çonkar, 2020).

However, it is crucial to acknowledge that the Sahel belt's diversity also fosters interdependence among its nations on an international scale (Thiam, 2022, p. 6). The unique characteristics of these diverse areas often necessitate cooperation and reliance on neighbouring countries for various resources. This interdependence extends to international affairs, where the Sahel countries frequently connect with external partners to address their multifaceted needs (Herrmann et al., 2020; Cepero et al., 2021; Adamou et al., 2021; Schwarz et al., 2022).

Terrorist Groups Operating in the Region

According to Raleigh, Nsaibia, and Dowd (2021), the two principal terrorist groups operating in the Sahel region are Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (EIGS). These two groups, who are related to ISIS AND AL-Qaeda in terms of logistics and loyalty, posing significant security threats, are not the only active factions in the region. In addition to JNIM and EIGS, approximately six splinter groups from both organisations operate semi-autonomously (Raleigh et al., 2021). These splinter groups, demonstrating substantial strength, often rival or surpass the dominant Islamic group in their respective areas of operation. Notably, the leaders of these splinter groups maintain unwavering loyalty towards the leadership of JNIM or EIGS.

Moreover, alongside these splinter groups, there exist numerous smaller local self-defence organisations and preachers who utilize

violence in regions infiltrated by JNIM and EIGS. These local actors, like the Badiun, adopt a defensive stance and employ forceful measures to safeguard their communities from the influence and activities of these extremist organisations. While they may operate on a smaller scale, their dedication and resourcefulness cannot be underestimated in countering the threat posed by JNIM and EIGS. Looking towards the broader scope, it is encouraging to observe that in 2021, there was a 4 per cent decline in the number of deaths resulting from terrorist incidents in the region compared to the previous year (Çonkar, 2020).

It is worth highlighting that the level of violence, terrorism, and the work of the terrorist groups is generally highest in Mali and Burkina Faso. These two countries have been plagued by the atrocities of terrorist groups, who have not only maintained a constant and alarming presence but have also gradually increased their attacks in other countries in the Sahel since 2021 after reducing their nefarious activity since 2018 (Nsaibia & Weiss, 2020).

For instance, In the period between 2013 and April 5th, 2019, AQIM has executed an astounding total of 36 attacks targeting the northern region: one attack occurred in 2013, four in 2015, 15 in 2017, nine in 2018, and an additional seven up until April 5th, 2019. Moreover, Burkina Faso has endured the wrath of 33 ISGS-orchestrated attacks from 2018 to 2019. Moreover, a previously unidentified male jihadist group, often referred to as the "Sultan of the Sahel," has emerged and has already conducted five deadly attacks in Burkina Faso since January 2020 (Çonkar, 2020; Fee, 2022; Bere, 2024; Glied, 2024).

It is also deeply concerning to witness how violence has flared up repeatedly in Mauritania, where, unfortunately, several innocent foreigners have fallen victim to kidnapping incidents by terrorists in order to ask for money to finance their activities. Moreover, the activity from the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) in southern Niger has also experienced a worrying surge since 2020, posing a grave threat to stability in the region (Haruna, 2022). In 2021, terrorist groups unfortunately found fertile ground for their malicious endeavours in Libya because of instability and civil war. Taking advantage of the ongoing instability, these groups have launched several large-scale attacks on major towns, causing havoc and despair among the innocent civilians caught in the crossfire (Béres, 2021).

Despite the above-mentioned literature, this research paper makes a significant theoretical contribution to the topic by identifying the missing links that contribute to the sustenance and nurture of terrorism in the Sahel regional and international systems. Usually, researchers conduct independent studies on terrorism, portraying it as a security threat in specific regions or globally, without combining both analyses. This research adds to the existing body of knowledge by highlighting the roles of transnational actors, political structures, and socio-economic contexts in fostering insecurity. For instance, the paper focuses on the responsibility of intervention, which, on the one hand, claims to fight terrorism and, on the other, promotes regional conflicts. It also explores the emergent socio-political system of the Sahel and how poverty, poor governance, and an open border systematically intertwine terrorism, crime, and politics.

Further, the paper places the results in the context of sovereignty and regional resistance. The study delves into the counter-terrorism approach prevalent in the literature, interpreting terrorism as a consequence of structural factors and domestic politics within transnational politics. With these connections of different actors and analyses, the paper contributes to theoretical discourses on terrorism in the Sahel, where complex and multifaceted approaches to analysis and prevention are highly appropriate.

Methodology

The research involves an in-depth review of existing literature, including academic articles, government and non-government reports, and expert analyses, to understand terrorism in the Sahel region. By examining a diverse range of sources, the study seeks to capture the multifaceted issues of terrorism, considering regional and international perspectives (Thurston, 2020; Walther & Christopoulos, 2015). The research methodology is designed to provide a holistic understanding of the terrorism landscape in the Sahel by incorporating data. Statistical data on terrorist incidents and fatalities are collected from reliable databases, such as the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED) and reports from the United Nations. This study employs a qualitative content analysis method to interpret textual data from literature, such as reports and academic articles. It also analyses data on terrorist acts and fatalities. This approach allows the study to put terrorism into the

geopolitical and economic perspective to understand the reasons behind the phenomenon and how to mitigate it.

Results

Many studies have shown that the impacts of terrorism on the Sahel region have been very significant, particularly in terms of the victims killed during the last two decades. The endless problems of terrorism in the region have made the number of deaths and victims ever increasing. The provided graph, titled "Violence Linked to Terrorist Groups in the Sahel," illustrates the number of fatalities from 2017 to a projected 2022 due to militant Islamist activities in the Sahel region.
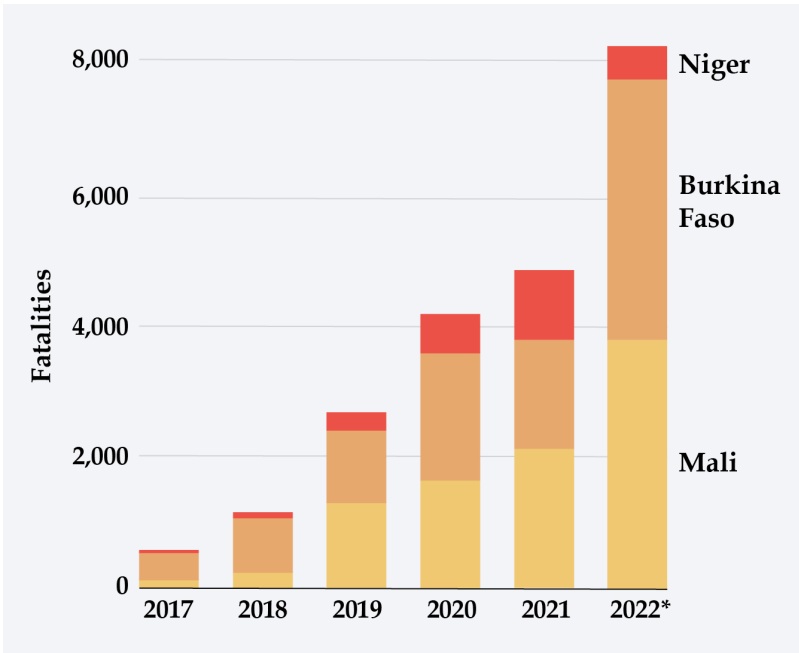
Figure (2) Violence Linked to Terrorist Groups in the Sahel (ACLEDP, 2022).

In 2017, the fatalities were relatively low across all three countries but began to rise sharply in subsequent years because of violence. By 2020, the death toll had more than quadrupled compared to 2017, with continued increases through 2021 and a significant projected peak in 2022. The graph shows that Burkina Faso and Niger, in particular, experienced the highest surges in fatalities, with Niger peaking in 2022. This upward trend underscores the growing instability and the severe

impact of militant Islamist violence in the Sahel region, emphasising the urgent need for strategic interventions and conflict resolution efforts.

Figure (3) below, presented by the Africa Center for Strategic Studies, provides a detailed overview of the spread and intensification of militant Islamist violence across several regions in the Sahel from 2017 to 2022. This visualisation categorises incidents by the number of violent events in each district, with a scale ranging from 1-5 events to over 160 events. The data is organized by country, region, and district, highlighting the most affected areas in Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Côte d'Ivoire, and Benin. The intensity of violence is depicted using varying shades of blue, with darker shades representing a higher number of events. In Mali, regions such as Mopti and Menaka have shown a significant increase in violence over the years, with multiple districts experiencing over 160 events by 2022. Similarly, in Burkina Faso, districts like Soum, Yagha, and Seno have seen a marked escalation in violence, indicating a worrying trend of militant activity.

The increasing difficulty of militant terrorist groups in the Sahel is also shown by this data, which demonstrates a substantial increase in violent events across priority districts within these areas. The patterns suggest that while some areas have been consistently affected over the years, others have seen a rapid escalation in violence, particularly in Burkina Faso and Mali. The table's projection for 2022 indicates a continuation of this trend, highlighting the need for targeted interventions to address the root causes of militancy and instability in these areas. The distribution of violent events also reflects broader geopolitical dynamics, such as porous borders and local grievances, which militant groups have exploited to expand their influence. This comprehensive visualisation is a critical tool for policymakers and researchers aiming to develop strategies to combat the spread of militant Islamist violence and promote stability in the Sahel.

The Epicentre of the Sahel Crisis

Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso are among the poorest countries in the world, the most vulnerable of which are economic and security. This situation is further complicated by the threat of terrorism that has struck them for more than one decade. However, after entering a herd with the West and neighbouring countries, the military who rule these three
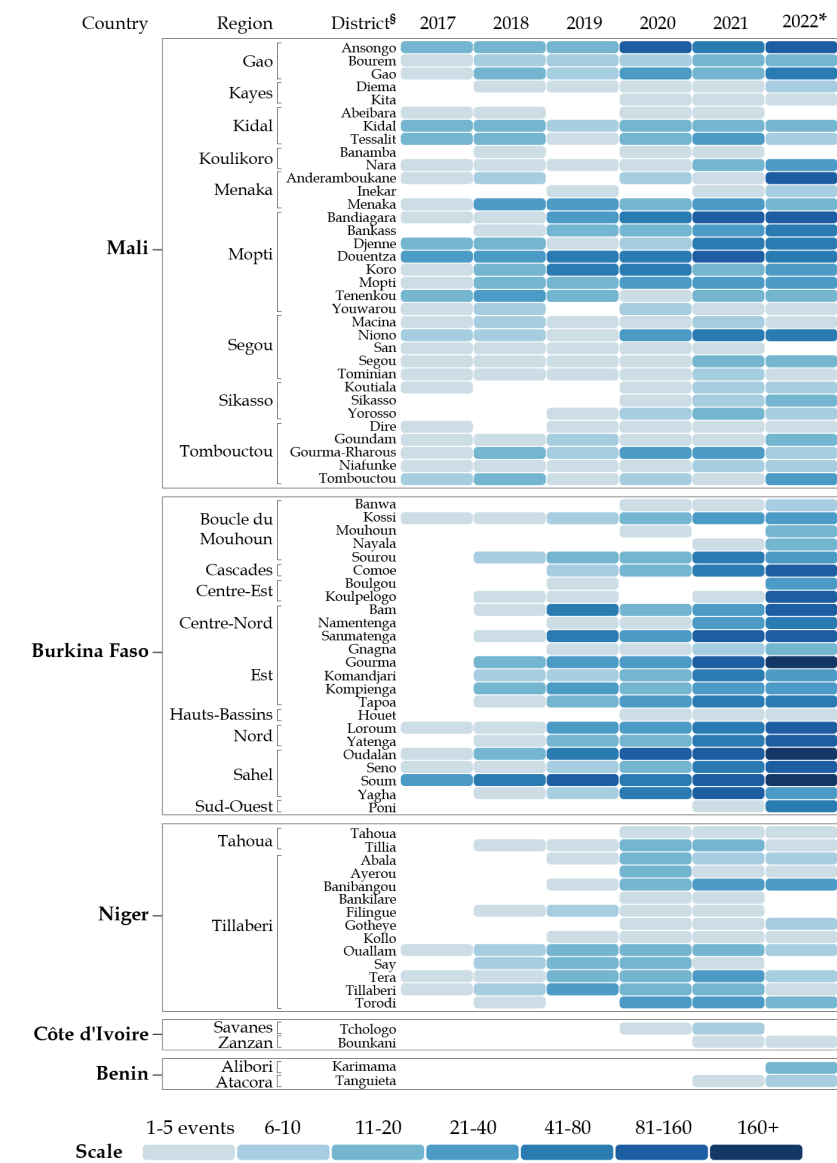
Figure (3) Spreading and Intensifying Terrorism Violence in the Sahel (ACLEDP, 2022).

countries dreams of establishing a federal unit that will enable them to face common challenges (Kamara, 2020; Markakis, 2021).

These three states have many common denominators, except poverty and security fragility (Boas & Strazzari, 2021; Koloma, 2022). According to Omotuyi, Agunyai, and Phago (2024), the most notable is that they are in exceptional constitutional situations after military coups that have led the armies to rule, making them subject to a strong regional blockade and prompting them to establish a strategic alliance with Russia (Omotuyi et al., 2024).

As a part of its new approach, last year, the three states established a military alliance under the name of the Alliance of Sahelian States (ASS) aimed at consolidating efforts to combat terrorism and organized and cross-border crime. At the same time, they announced at the end of January 2024 the official withdrawal from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) (Grutjen, 2024; Owa et al., 2024; Onapajo & Babalola, 2024). But the most remarkable step, announced by ministers from the three states during a meeting in Burkina Faso at the end of February 2024, was their desire to establish a federal system that, if achieved, would be an unprecedented step in the history of the Sahel region (Grütjen, 2024).

During the above-mentioned meeting, several experts and officials discussed establishing a Confederacy among the three states in the first phase, which would pave the way towards a future federal system. The Minister of Defence of Burkina Faso, General Kassoum Coulibaly, concluded that the meeting would lead to finalising the federal structure the three states aspire to (Speight, 2024; Aziz & Mohamed, 2024). Following the meeting, the Minister of Defence of Mali, in February 2024, said that "the Malian army had become well-armed and had qualifications to regain control of all financial territory, but would not stop but rather sought to assist Niger and Burkina Faso in the fight against terrorism."

Although more than six months have passed since the establishment of the Alliance of Sahelian States, the level of security and military coordination among them remains low, and terrorist organisations continue to have the capacity to move freely in the border triangle, although their armies have achieved some victories, they remain limited and individually. It is because a group of generals leads these dreaming

endeavours in the three countries, but before that, they have to overcome serious difficulties related to security and military coordination at the border to regain control of large areas of their states that remain under regulatory control by al-Qaeda and ISIS (Glied, 2024; Ojewale, 2024; Bere; 2024).

It is also remarkable to highlight that while the threat of terrorism drives the Sahelian States (Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso) to unite, the military who govern these fragile States relies on the threat of terrorism as an argument to remain in power, disrupt the Constitution and declare a state of emergency, and reject any talk of presidential elections in the near future. The lack of coordination with the States of the region, particularly Algeria, as one of the regional forces in North Africa, which has previous experience in the fight against terrorism, has further complicated the process of dismantling armed groups, which often have extensions outside the three states (Bereketeab, 2024).

Terrorism Threat in the Sahel

The word 'terrorism' has different interpretations based on the point of view of the state, system, or multinational corporation (Duvall & Stohl, 2020). Atmaca (2017) indicates that the concept may vary based on the boundary of influence, presenting an intriguing perspective on its multifaceted nature. Indeed, what the analytical standpoint sides (Atmaca, 2017; Duvall & Stohl, 2020) are considering is not to disregard the possibility that the current opinion and definition of the concept change depending on the different perspectives that come into play (Horowitz, 2023). Moreover, it is crucial to acknowledge that a qualified definition of this concept does not exist. Therefore, it becomes evident that various scholars (Ackerman & Burnham, 2021), equipped with their diverse backgrounds and approaches, define terrorism in different ways both etymologically, exploring its linguistic origins, and in terms of its own unique characteristics and how it manifests in the world we live in today, that can represent the interest and perspective of some parts as well (Ackerman & Burnham, 2021).

In the case of Africa, it is necessary to mention that the concept of terrorism is often confused with the concept of freedom fighter or liberation army (Richards, 2022). Adler (2023, p. 71) argues that terms like freedom fighter or liberation army are much more likely to be designed by the ruling people imposing positive charges on them;

conversely, such negative charges are awarded to these words by the opposing side. Additionally, according to Western countries, for instance, the resistance movement in Palestine is considered 'terrorism,' but it is on the flip side for the Muslim countries. At this point, within the definition of terrorism, only four fundamental characteristics of terrorism, which have an indispensable impact on security, will be identified, starting with the necessary elements that constitute modern terrorism. The use of violence against civilians, killing people, and destroying life necessities, like roads, hospitals, and other public infrastructures, all can be considered an act of terrorism (Pašagić, 2020; Larue & Danzell, 2022; Jore, 2023; Fortna, 2023; Ahmed & Lynch, 2024).

The Sahel countries suffer from the internal spread of terrorism itself. Poverty and internal conflicts give rise to radical movements that threaten the security of people within these countries and from neighbouring countries. Second, regional actors such as criminal organisations and terrorist networks are increasingly threatening the security of the countries (Friedman, 2023). Regional and international criminal organisations, such as drug smugglers and human traffickers, are increasingly using porous borders to smuggle drugs and traffic human beings. Smugglers use the eastern and western borders of the Sahel countries as bridges to smuggle many goods, which affects the economic and social security of these nations. Third, the Sahel countries suffer from armed conflicts in neighbouring countries that have troubled cross-border implications, and therefore, the problem of the neighbouring countries became the problem of the country itself, making it difficult to deal with it alone (Hecan & Farhaoui, 2021).

The Sahel in the Regional and International Context

This study also found that actions taken by previous colonial powers, such as France, could provoke a substantial negative reaction or be seen as an instance of Western interventionism (Schmidt, 2013, p. 189; Beloff, 2024). The U.S. government initiated this initiative in anticipation of al-Qaeda and other terrorist organisations relocating to the Sahel region, which is perceived as a safe zone (Davis, 2016, p. 69). This notion gained prominence in U.S. foreign and military policy. In response to the challenging landscape and unstable governments in the Sahel region, the United States initiated the Trans-Saharan Counterterrorism Partnership

(formerly called the Trans-Saharan Counterterrorism Initiative) in 2005. The aim of this program was to address the perceived threat in the region (Davis, 2016, pp. 151-154). In addition, the presence of fully-equipped Tuaregs, who had previously served as auxiliary forces for Gaddafi's military, returning from Libya to northern Mali exacerbated an already complex situation (János, 2013; Hashim, 2013).

French military intervention, on the other hand, seems not to have improved security in the conflict-torn regions, with JNIM-AQIM, ISIS and switch-sides bandit chiefs operating in these regions (Godo, 2021; Sempijja & Eyita, 2022). Furthermore, the impact of French intervention goes beyond just the immediate security situation. It has also had socio-political consequences that have negative implications (Bertrand et al., 2023). It led the peoples of the region to confront their rulers, believing that they were returning French colonialism to the region. The Sahel region experienced increased security threats and instability due to subsequent coups d'état to overthrow France's loyalists.

Some view French intervention as a form of economic exploitation and a continuation of historical imperialism (Chafer, 2020; Guichaoua, 2020; Marchal, 2021; Egbewatt, 2023). They argue that the intervention only serves to protect French interests, particularly in the form of resource extraction and control. This perspective raises questions about the true intentions behind such interventions and whether they truly prioritise the well-being and autonomy of the affected populations. Moreover, the situation's complexity is heightened by the presence of various non-state actors operating in the Sahel regions.

On the one hand, some locals see the presence of former colonial powers as a necessary evil, as it provides a certain level of stability and prevents the spread of extremism. They view it as a means to safeguard their communities from further violence and turmoil (Marchal, 2021; Egbewatt, 2023).

The ongoing crisis threatened the security of neighbouring Algeria, the strongest military power in the Sahel region (Ammour, 2012; Conkar, 2020; Boukhars, 2019). However, the establishment of the G5 Sahel, which did not include Algeria, hindered these regional initiatives, but this did not generate any regret among French authorities; on the contrary, they saw it as an excellent opportunity to counter Algeria's army and its strategic influence in the Sahara-Sahel region (Camara,

2020). Furthermore, likely, France is not interested in ensuring complete security in the region, particularly in Niger, as it could impede the realisation of the Algerian-Nigerian gas project. Therefore, the ongoing situation in the Sahel also serves as a tool to weaken the influence and development of regional powers.

Discussion

In the midst of a wave of terror in the region, a series of coups has significantly rearranged the geopolitical landscape in the Sahel region, and the political repercussions of the coups d ' état of the so-called national military councils in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso have changed the balance of power between international actors in the region, in ways that go beyond the Sahel (Sandnes, 2023).

The forced withdrawal of foreign forces from the Sahel began after the second coup d ' état in Mali in 2021. With popular support, the new authorities have called on foreign forces, particularly France, to leave the country, followed by the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) (Carbone & Casola, 2022, p. 84). After being forced out of Mali, France found a strong ally in Niger, deploying 1,500 elements to continue anti-terrorist operations on the coast. However, the coup d ' état of July 2023 and the severe resentment of Nigerians forced Paris to reconsider its presence in Niger and the Sahel region in general (Sowale, 2024). Days after the coup, thousands of Nigerians supporting the coup demonstrated in front of the French Embassy in Niamey, denouncing the alleged neocolonial behaviour of France (Prashad et al., 2023; Ukpere & Frank, 2024), sometimes waving Russian flags, although there was no evidence of Russia's involvement in the coup officially condemned by the Kremlin.

It is particularly noteworthy to mention that Mali, being positioned at the very heart of these immensely formidable terrorist networks, is presumed to possess a certain level of Jihadi activity prevailing in the adjacent areas (Ajodo, 2023). Nevertheless, it is of utmost importance to acknowledge that the intensity of such aforementioned activities is expected to diminish when juxtaposed with the levels witnessed within the geographical boundaries of Mali (Bösch, 2023). As an undeniable outcome, it becomes increasingly apparent that other countries located within the Sahelian region, where the extremist ideology has not yet taken such deeply entrenched roots and where the governmental

mechanisms are relatively better equipped to address the prevailing security challenges, shall generally experience a lower degree of terrorist activity imposed upon their territorial boundaries, like Algeria.

On the other hand, al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) have been actively engaged in conducting frequent cross-border attacks in Burkina Faso while also unleashing their brutal assaults within the country's boundaries (Bere, 2024). Primarily, these infiltrations originate from Mali, with intermittent cases of incursions from Niger. However, due to the challenging topographical conditions prevailing in the Sahel region, attacks on the security forces of Burkina Faso from Niger are relatively infrequent (Glied, 2024; Bere, 2024). The extremist groups typically adopt a strategy to infiltrate the country and wage guerrilla warfare against the military forces. Consequently, the security services stationed in the three Tuareg provinces, which encompass the northern part of Burkina Faso and share borders with Mali and Niger, face an alarmingly high level of danger (Çonkar, 2020). This alarming escalation in violence reflects the volatile and precarious security situation the nation faces (Çonkar, 2020; Fee, 2022; Bere, 2024; Glied, 2024).

When the military rulers in Niger decided to put an end to the presence of American armed forces on the territory of the country in May, this move was met with great concern in Washington (Rogers & Goxho, 2023; Segell, 2023). Niger, located at the heart of the sub-Saharan Sahel region, hosts two major bases used by the United States for long-term surveillance and tracking of violent extremist organisations in Libya, Chad, Mali, and Nigeria. The U.S. Military Command in Africa is preparing to evacuate them by September 2024 (Chin & Bartos, 2024).

All the Sahel countries shared the same grievances when their armed forces were angry at the ongoing attacks by extremist organisations against the local army and population. This resentment was exacerbated by the failure of Western forces in the region to deal with these groups (Vogel, 2024). With increased popular anger, these armies had only to intervene to eliminate what they considered incompetent civilians and foreign forces unable to counter-terrorism (Jackson, 2023). Civil society representatives believe that terrorism in the region originated from the 2011 NATO intervention in Libya, with France playing a major role (Alcaro & Pirozzi, 2014, p. 19).

Terrorism, which is considered a "symptom" rather than a cause of conflict, encompasses various dimensions beyond its international scope (Olofinbiyi, 2023, p. 2). While the number of non-African actors sympathising with the Pan-Islamist cause, such as Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant ISIL, and al-Shabaab, is on the rise, it is crucial to recognize the intricate dynamics involving leaders with competing, albeit trans-border, political loyalties. Within the Western and North African sphere, there exists a widespread inclination among the general public and media to narrow down terrorist violence solely (Abdulmajid, 2021, p. 83; Glied, 2024).

Both governmental and non-governmental actors have their agendas and engage in regional power games. The responses to terrorist activities are different and, more to the point, motivated by different regional and international powers' interests. Algeria and the USA, for instance, have done more to address terrorism than Libya. On the other hand, the Nigerian army has explained its poor fight against AQIM for several reasons. One of them is the help, which is not enough, coming from the USA – training and adequate weapons. Hence, it is in the interest of the ruling few local clans to attract foreign aid to help secure their survival (de Larramendi, 2020). Aid from abroad may take the form of humanitarian assistance or direct support to the army in Sahelian states, such as Niger and Mali.

Local non-state organisations are not averse to the involvement of European and international actors either. For instance, the Nigerien's Movement for Justice (MNJ), as a Tuareg[1] the movement found it useful to exploit the growing momentum of humanitarian and military intervention in neighbouring Sudan's Darfur. Starting in, but much more after 2002, there are many reports about 'foreign' armed groups to whom the government of Niger assigns Tuareg identity and who benefit from the security crisis in the wasteland in different ways, like smuggling, selling weapons, and helping the other local groups in the region.

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[1] The name "Tuareg" denotes tribal and nomadic communities that speak the Tuareg language. There are an estimated 1.2 million Tuareg individuals spread across Libya, Mali, Niger, Algeria, and Burkina Faso. Nevertheless, the Tuareg are a minority community in those countries (Bashir, 2022).

On the other hand, the United Nations is the most significant international actor with regard to Sahel security, which seeks to exert its influence through its support to the G5 Sahel at the *Conseil de paix et de sécurité* (CPS)[2]. The United Nations' engagements contribute to conflict resolution, peacebuilding, promotion of human rights, and international humanitarian interventions. However, after the withdrawal of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, the mission of the UN became unclear, as there were more possibilities of non-cooperation shown by the leaders of these countries with foreign actors.

With the decline of Western influence in the Sahel region, key actors such as Russia, China, Turkey, Iran, and the United Arab Emirates are playing greater roles and promoting their economic interests by building relations with the region's new leaders. Consequently, Africa has become the scene of renewed competition among the great powers, reminding us of the Cold War (Stambøl & Berger, 2023). Russia has played a greater role in security issues, albeit driven by economic interests. The Sahel allows Moscow to re-establish its existence and prestige, which the Soviet Union once enjoyed. Since the first decade of the twenty-first century, Moscow has strengthened its presence in Africa, signed a number of agreements with African States, and tried to secure military bases. In the Sahel region, Moscow relied on the Vagner Mercenary Group, which has now been reconstituted as the Russian Africa Corps, which spread to Burkina Faso after the *coup d ' état* and is located in Mali, Libya, and the Central African Republic to assist existing regimes in the fight against terrorism (Omotuyi et al., 2024).

The changes in the Sahel region will have serious implications for Algeria and the wider region. The stability of its southern border with Niger and Mali is essential, not only because of the threats of cross-border terrorism and organised crime but also because of the potential impact on its large investments in various regional projects. These include the 4,100 km Trans-Saharan Gas Pipeline for the export of

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[2] The G5 Sahel Alliance is a regional collaborative framework created in 2014 to tackle security concerns and development initiatives in West Africa. The coalition includes Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger. The withdrawal of Burkina Faso and Niger in 2023, following Mali's departure in 2022, precipitated the disbandment of the alliance (Security Council Report, 2023).

Nigerian natural gas to Europe via Niger and Algeria and the nearly 4,800 km trans-Saharan highway between Algiers and Lagos via Niger as well (Obasi, 2023). The conflict or continuing unrest could jeopardise these projects and Algeria's political, economic, and security relations over the years with its neighbours in the Sahel region and accelerate the flow of migrants into its territory in their attempts to reach Europe.

The situation in the Sahel may be intended to conflict over the new gas and hydrogen lines. The arrival of gas and hydrogen in Europe from Algeria through the Sahel would be a powerful motive for some states, Russia, the United Arab Emirates, Morocco, and France, not to conflict in the region and not to allow the completion of the Algerian-Nigerian project (Voytyuk, 2023). The Turkish presence may also be intended to control the transport of gas through the Eurasia project between Azerbaijan and Turkey, of which the failure of the Nigerian Algerian project may be at the core of the foreign powers' presence in the Sahel region now for purely economic reasons (Hafner et al., 2023).

The greatest risk of redrawing the geopolitical landscape in the Sahel is that these military councils may become mere pawns rather than actors with genuine will. They lack a clear strategy and vision to ensure the security necessary for economic development and stability in the region (da Silva et al., 2023).

Conclusion

The current terrorism in the Sahel can be viewed as a comprehensive issue deeply rooted in the region's social, political, economic, and geographical frameworks. In this research, it is manifested that Saharan terrorism is not only a local affair but also an international issue that is compounded by poor governance, poverty, a borderless nature, and dynamics. Global and regional players have merged with the internal variables of the Sahel situation, such as ethnic tensions and youth marginalisation, with external factors leading to the emergence of terrorism. The problem is also echoed by the soaring influx of refugees and inadequate solutions from regional governments to address the fundamental causes that fuel instabilities. Furthermore, the paper concludes that geopolitical and economic factors often drive outside actors' participation rather than their belief in their ability to contribute to regional stability. This duplicity harms any attempt to sustain long-lasting peace and development in the Sahel region.

The author's current research highlights the use of terrorism as a political tool, a phenomenon that demands attention. The study established that today's governments and rebels use terrorism to achieve their goals by targeting governance institutions, exploiting regional conflicts, and using international efforts to further their causes. This notion of 'surge-violence,' whereby state and non-state actors pander in cycles of self-serving coalitions, vitiates the region's security landscape. This paper reveals that today's friend is the enemy of tomorrow, where governments, foreign powers, and factions are involved, as illustrated in this analysis. Such dynamics sustain insecurity and hinder efforts to establish effective counter-terrorism measures.

Thus, the study contends that eradication of terrorism in the Sahel requires more than a military-led solution and must incorporate social, political, and economic factors that promote extremism. Therefore, Effective strategies should prioritise strengthening governance, fostering economic opportunities, and promoting regional collaboration to counteract the drivers of terrorism. Moreover, by locating terrorism within this larger framework, the research also contributes to understanding the problem and puts forward the general outlines to meet the complex task of combating terrorism in the Sahel region.

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