

The Rise of Jihad in the Sahel

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1. Executive Summary

The Sahel has become the epicenter of global terrorism, with groups like JNIM, AQIM, ISIS affiliates, and Boko Haram exploiting state fragility, ungoverned spaces, and deep-seated grievances to expand their operations. Shia extremism has also gained a foothold in the region. A major driver of jihadism is the growing nexus between organized crime syndicates and terror groups, exacerbated by the perennial weakness of state institutions. Endemic corruption, poorly trained security forces, popular alienation, and ineffective governance have all contributed to state fragility if not outright failure.

The Sahel's history of military coups has further destabilized the region. Coups have suspended democratic governance, disrupted alliances, and deepened instability, creating opportunities for jihadist expansion. Despite their promises, military juntas have failed to halt the advance of militant groups.

Regional divisions compound the crisis. Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger have distanced themselves from Western-aligned blocs like ECOWAS to form the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) and align with Russia. Meanwhile, Turkey, Iran, and China have increased their involvement in the region.

The withdrawal of Western forces, particularly France and the United States, has created a dangerous power vacuum. France, once the dominant military actor, ended its counter-terrorism mission amid local resentment, while the U.S. withdrew following tensions with Niger's junta. Russia has filled the void, deploying Wagner Group mercenaries (now rebranded as the Africa Corps) and securing lucrative resource deals, including uranium and gold.

This instability poses broader geopolitical risks. External actors like Turkey, China, and Iran pursue their interests, while Israel faces threats to key regional partners like Chad and Nigeria. However, Israel can also leverage its counter-terrorism expertise

to support Western-aligned coastal nations. Addressing these challenges requires an urgent, coordinated strategy integrating security, governance, and development.



2. Introduction

Friday, August 9, 2024, was a beautiful day in the town of Tawori, Burkina Faso. The soldiers heading out on patrol were in high spirits as they climbed into their vehicles looking forward to the weekend. Their playful banter and laughter were soon to give way to pain and death as Al Qaeda-aligned Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) fighters ambushed the convoy killing 150 soldiers. Shaken by the loss of so many men, the military leadership ordered more defensive measures to be undertaken – thereby handing JNIM and other insurgents the space to take the offensive. On August 24, 2024, the military became aware of the presence of JNIM militants around the village of Barsalogo. Far from taking the fight to them, the military ordered the hapless villagers to build a trench around the town. These villagers were four kilometers from their homes and received no military protection when suddenly JNIM fighters appeared on motorcycles at precisely 11 a.m. and proceeded to gun them down. The massacre occurred in mere minutes but as JNIM fighters retreated to their hideouts, they left behind 600 lifeless corpses.²

JNIM was not only targeting Burkina Faso. A month later, it was the turn of Mali. In a brazen dawn attack on the Malian capital, Bamako, on September 17, 2024, JNIM attacked a military training school killing several officers and cadets. The insurgents then went on to attack several other targets in the capital, seemingly with impunity, before withdrawing.³ The audacious nature of the attack was evident in that it was the first time in a decade that the terrorists targeted the capital. Moreover, directly targeting the military underscored how powerless the army is and undermined public confidence in the ability of the state to protect its citizens. In both Burkina Faso and Mali, the military leaders came to power in coups promising their citizens that they would quell the Islamist threat.

Of course, it's not only JNIM that is active in the Sahel. Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, Boko Haram, Islamic State West Africa Province, Islamic State Greater Sahel and the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa are just some of the Islamist groups



proliferating across vast swathes of the Sahel. The Sahel region has become the epicenter of global terrorism according to the 2024 Global Terrorism Index produced by the Institute for Economics and Peace. In 2021, the region saw an average of 128 terrorist attacks a month. Since the start of 2024, the number of such attacks has risen to 224 per month. Burkina Faso alone accounts for 25 percent of all terrorism fatalities globally.⁴

How did these ominous developments come about? What are its implications for regional and international security? What can be done to reverse the gains of the jihadists? Before unpacking these questions, four caveats are in order:

1. Defining the Sahel: Before examining the emergence of jihad in the region, we need to be clear, what constitutes the Sahel? The term emanates from the Arabic *sahil* meaning from coast to coast – from Senegal on the Atlantic running parallel to the Sahara, to Sudan and Eritrea on the Red Sea.⁵ Most academics and policymakers have found this to be far too expansive and have opted for a narrower geographical focus when discussing the Sahel. In 2002, the United States established the Pan Sahel Initiative (PSI) in an effort to curb extremism in this region. It involved three countries – Chad, Niger and Mauritania. Three years later, the PSI morphed into the Trans-Sahara Counter-Terrorism Initiative (TSCTI) which now included Algeria, Morocco, Nigeria, Senegal and Tunisia.⁶ This expansion of what constitutes the Sahel makes sense given the ethnic and cultural dynamics of the region. Tuaregs, for instance, are present in Algeria, Burkina Faso, Libya, Mali and Niger. The Kanuri, meanwhile, reside in Chad, Niger and Nigeria. The Fulani are dispersed amongst Guinea, Mali, Niger, Nigeria and Senegal. Hausa, meanwhile, is widely spoken from coast to coast – Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Chad, Congo, Eritrea, Ghana, Niger, Nigeria, Sudan and Togo. The conflict dynamics existing from coast to coast also militate towards a more expansive definition of what constitutes the Sahel.

2. Regional Security Complexes: A regional security complex exists where sources of national insecurity become integrated and difficult to disentangle. Over time, these sources of insecurity become mutually reinforcing and the lines between national and regional security become blurred.⁷ The current upsurge in Islamist violence has its origins in the fall of Gaddafi's Libya. Malian Tuaregs armed with weapons from looted Libyan arsenals returned home where they militarily challenged Bamako.⁸ Evidence of a regional security complex is all the more apparent if one notes how jihadists like Boko Haram operate in and recruit from Cameroon, Chad, Niger, Nigeria and Mali. Given the ongoing civil war in Sudan, the mass exodus of nearly a million Darfur residents crossing Chad's 32 entry points to escape the violence spilling over into eastern Chad highlights the complexity of regional security dynamics.⁹ More recently, climate change has also exacerbated regional security dynamics. Indeed, the Sahel region is warming 1.5 times faster than the planetary average. This, in turn, has intensified desertification and food insecurity, resulting in spiraling communal violence between herding, farming and fishing communities. The extremists have fueled these communal tensions, throwing religion into an already volatile mix. Moreover, they have sought to exploit the popular alienation citizens feel with the inability of regional governments to assist local communities.¹⁰

3. Reframing Security: The issue of climate change and its nexus with terrorism allows us to posit a third caveat. The term security in this paper will not be used in its classical realist sense privileging the state. Adopting a realist lens is problematic for several reasons in the African context. First, political elites in African societies and their predatory behavior and authoritarian tendencies often mean that state security is really regime security at the expense of the security of ordinary citizens. As explained below, many foreign interventions in the region failed to appreciate this distinction and resulted in the propping up

of local elites, thereby earning the antipathy of citizens and playing into the hands of the militants. Second, often the writ of African governments does not extend beyond the capital city. Indeed, the notion of a state having a monopoly over coercive force within its borders is a fiction in the context of the Sahelian states as we demonstrate below. Third, given the interplay between military and non-military causes of insecurity, it would make sense for an expanded view of security. As such, this paper embraces the concept of human security as expounded by the Bonn Declaration in 1991 which boldly declared that human security is “the absence of threat to human life, lifestyle and culture through the fulfillment of basic needs”.¹¹ Allowing one to define security in this manner also allows one to broaden the number of actors to provide comprehensive security beyond that of the state.

4. Islam vs. Islamism: Our final caveat refers to our distinction between Islam and Islamism. The majority of the world’s two billion Muslims go about practicing their faith peacefully. That is Islam. Islamism, meanwhile, is a twentieth-century totalitarian ideology that seeks to mold Islamic religious tradition to serve narrow political ends of domination. Khaled Abou El Fadl refers to this as a “puritanical” tradition within Islam noted for its “fanatical reductionism and narrow-minded literalism”.¹² Whilst all Islamists reject secularism and a liberal polity, and the West, there is a spectrum of groups seeking evolutionary change. At one end are groups such as Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood which operates both politically and socially through various educational institutions and charitable foundations. At the other extreme are violent extremists, represented by the various jihadist organizations dotting the arid landscapes of the Sahel.

3. The Origins of Jihad in the Sahel

The roots of extremism in the Sahel lie in a combination of factors: the historical context shaping more extreme forms of Islamism, the ethnic nature of jihadist movements, economic dimensions, and the influence of Islamist thinking emanating from the Middle East.

Islamist militancy, and consequently jihadism, has a long history in the Sahel region and is intricately related to the process of state formation. In 1673, jihadism and Fulani nationalism converged in the Senegal River Valley. A century later, in 1725, a jihadist Fulani uprising began in Futa Jallon. These uprisings destabilized the political order for nearly a century, only ending with the establishment of the Dina of Macina in 1818. This legacy continued with El Hadj Umar Tall, who began his jihad in 1856, culminating in 1861 with the formation of his Toucouleur Empire. Undoubtedly, one of the most impressive jihads undertaken was by Uthman dan Fodio. A Fulani scholar, Dan Fodio's jihad began in 1804 and resulted in the establishment of a caliphate which only ended with the arrival of the British in 1903.¹³ There was also Muhammad Ahamd Al-Mahdi who in 1881 launched his political and religious movement against the Khedivate of Egypt which had ruled Sudan since 1821. This brief historical overview is important for three interconnected reasons. First, the shared historical experience of jihad across the region – from Senegal to Sudan – underscores the importance of viewing the Sahel in its more expansive context. Second, the fact that extremism emerged organically from within these societies suggests that what is needed is sustainable solutions ameliorating the structural conditions giving rise to Islamist militancy. Third, contemporary jihadists look for inspiration from these historical jihadist movements. Boko Haram seeks to emulate the success of the jihad of Uthman dan Fodio in its campaign against the Nigerian state.¹⁴ Abdelrahman Al-Kheir, an advisor of the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF) which is currently fighting the Sudanese Armed Forces points out that the RSF is a 130-year-old institution having its origins in the Mahdist state and that its goals were similar to that of Al-Mahdi.¹⁵

Another example is the 4,000-strong Macina Liberation Front (MLF) which cynically exploits faith (Islam) for reasons of ethno-centric nationalism and political opportunism. At its core, it is an ethnic Fulani (also referred to as Peul) movement. It seeks to re-establish the pre-colonial Macina Empire. This provides additional insights into the flaws of realist thinking – defense of the state. All over the Sahel, the post-colonial state is being challenged by pre-colonial polities. Recruits into the MLF do not emanate from any one country, but rather across several countries across the Sahel where 20 million Fulani reside irrespective of state borders.¹⁶

Like the MLF, Boko Haram is an ethnic movement that instrumentalizes religion to consolidate its identity and draw in recruits from co-religionists. Boko Haram is Kanuri-dominated.¹⁷ Its recruits emanate from the 7 million Kanuri in Nigeria, the 1,1 million Kanuri in Chad, the 850,000 Kanuri in Niger and the 56,000 Kanuri in Cameroon.¹⁸ In seeking to boost its ranks, Boko Haram has attempted to recruit from the Hausa-Fulani peoples of the Sahel, however, the upper echelons of the organization remain exclusively Kanuri. This ethnic basis of Boko Haram can also be discerned by its areas of operation – the Karem-Bornu region which existed from the 1380s to 1893.

Outstanding research by Schwartz, Dunkel and Waterman¹⁹ demonstrates how terrorist groups can take root where there is a confluence of different identities. Cultural identities that emphasize the group over the individual combined with a fundamentalist and literal interpretation of religious texts as well as a social identity based on sharp contrasts between “insiders” and “outsiders” all contribute to extremism. Economic fault lines reinforce this insider-outsider dichotomy. While the average national poverty rate in Mali is 64%, the figure is much higher in the Tuareg-dominated northern regions such as Kidal where the poverty rate is 92%. Similarly, while the overwhelmingly Christian South of Nigeria has a poverty rate of 27%, the figure for the Muslim North is 72%.²⁰ These stark inequalities were bound to fuel grievances against the state, and these have been compounded further by the corruption inherent among state elites.

While the majority of the jihadist movements dotting the Sahel have their roots in local conditions, local grievances and a desire to create pre-colonial empires on an ethno-religious basis, it is also true that since at least the 1970s, radical Islamist thought has had a huge impact on the trajectory of these Sahelian militants. Thousand of students have left the region to pursue an Islamic curriculum at such Middle Eastern institutions such as Al Azhar in Cairo, Al-Uzai in Lebanon, and the University of Damascus. Others were educated in Wahhabi-oriented universities across Saudi Arabia. It was there that many were radicalized and then went on to teach this Salafist Islam upon their return to their home countries, seeking to undermine traditional Sufi Islamic practices.

According to John Yoh,²¹ *“Most of the students from Africa who studied in the Middle East are accused of being behind the religious conflicts that have been going on in Nigeria, Ghana, Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, South Africa and Ethiopia In fact, some reports in most West and East African media suggest that those students who studied in the Middle East are often recruited before their departure to their various countries into some radical religious group operating in guise, a humanitarian agency, causing inter-religious conflicts in Africa. It is this group of students that are considered to be the source of the so-called Islamic radicalism in Africa. Some of these groups are said to be connected with Islamic organizations operating in Africa under the guise of religious agencies, some of which were accused a couple of years ago to be behind domestic conflicts and public insecurities...”* These have become the conduits of extremism in these countries.

Of course, other forms of radicalization persist, including online radicalization. In the Sahel, the penetration of radical literature had a hugely malevolent impact on extremism. Muhammad Ibn al-Wahhab’s *Kitab al Tawhid* (The Book on the Oneness of God), a Wahhabi classic, inspired some militants in Mali to rebrand themselves as the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO). With the establishment and strengthening of Al Qaeda and Islamic State local franchises and the movement of veteran fighters from the parent body to African affiliates, this connection between Sunni extremists in the Middle East and the Sahel has strengthened.²²

However, extremism in the Sahel is not fueled solely by Sunni militants; Shia extremism is also present. This is evident in the expansion of the Shia terrorist organization Hezbollah (Party of God) across West Africa and the Sahel. Lebanese-based and Iranian-funded, Hezbollah's tentacles are entrenched throughout the region. Major James Love²³ provides a detailed analysis of Hezbollah's modus operandi.

Hezbollah infiltration begins subtly, with cells seeking to build trust among locals while avoiding the attention of the authorities. Charitable and social welfare programs are employed to gain goodwill. Once this is achieved, the recruitment process begins, allowing cells to commence operations.

In Nigeria, Hezbollah's operationalization of cells took the form of support for the radical Shi'ite cleric Shaykh Ibrahim Zakzaky's Islamic Movement of Nigeria (IMN). This was graphically illustrated when IMN members audaciously attacked the motorcade of the Emir of Zaria, Alhaji Shehu Idris. The Emir happened to be on his way to attend a security meeting in Kaduna where the IMN was on the agenda. Investigations later revealed that IMN members had received religious and military training in Tehran.²⁴

4. The Trajectory of Jihad in the Sahel

"Persistent and gaining strength" is how a 2024 Report from the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) describes the various jihadist groups operating across the Sahel.²⁵ The frequency, lethality and sophistication of attacks in the region have increased. Moreover, the CFR report notes, that the terror groups are expanding their geographical reach and are expanding toward coastal states like Ghana and Senegal which have so far remained largely immune from the violence.

A key driver of this jihadist expansion is the growing nexus between organized crime syndicates and terror groups in the region. Funds derived from the illicit smuggling of contraband, extortion, and human and narco-trafficking are used to arm terror groups, remunerate their members and their families, and to establish rudimentary social welfare projects to win loyalty in the communities where these groups operate.

Moreover, since 2017 there has been a trend of mergers between smaller jihadist groups into bigger networks. For instance, different Al Qaeda affiliates have come together to form JNIM.²⁶ This consolidation suggests that global jihadist ideology is becoming the primary motivation for these groups, overshadowing local grievances giving rise to the formation of militant organizations. As a result, addressing local issues alone will not curb jihadist militancy, and negotiations with such groups are bound to fail.

While mergers are taking place within jihadi networks, there is also growing conflict between Al Qaeda and Islamic State groups²⁷ over recruits, territory and revenue. These rivalries could present policy-makers opportunities they can exploit.

Another factor contributing to the rise of jihadism in the region is the perennial weakness of the state. Endemic corruption, poorly trained security forces, popular alienation and ineffective governance have all contributed to state fragility, if not failure. According to the 2024 Fragile State Index, several Sahelian states rank among the most fragile countries in the world. Chad is ranked 10th, Mali 14th, Nigeria 15th, Niger 19th, Cameroon 20th and Burkina Faso 21st.²⁸ This fragility and the resulting contraction of the state creates ungoverned spaces and power vacuums that jihadists are quick to exploit.

Exacerbating state weakness and facilitating the ascendancy of the jihadists is the Sahel's long history of coups. Between 1960 and 2022, Mali, Mauritania and Niger experienced 25 successful coups. Following coups in 2020 and 2021 in Mali, a new wave of coups wracked the region with coups in Burkina Faso, Chad and Niger.²⁹ While the military leaders who came to power in these coups promised to prosecute the war against terror with added vigor, they have all failed as witnessed by the increased number of attacks in their countries. In Burkina Faso, Captain Ibrahim Traore styles himself as a modern-day Thomas Sankara employing revolutionary anti-colonial rhetoric and undeniable charisma. However, these qualities are a poor substitute for

an effective counter-insurgency campaign. Today, half of Burkina Faso is in the hands of jihadist forces.³⁰

This raises questions as to why military juntas have failed to curb the advance of jihadism in their countries.

First, coups disrupt the overall command and control structures of the military, creating internal tensions between soldiers supporting the existing government and those seeking to overthrow it. Tensions are further exacerbated in coups led by junior officers against their seniors.

Second, the military's top-down culture is a poor fit for the fractious polities of the Sahel. The lack of consultation on the part of military regimes undermines a "whole of society" approach to counter-terrorism.

Third, military regimes that have recently come into power have allowed themselves to become pawns in a new Cold War between Russia and the West. This has resulted in the splitting of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) into two, with ECOWAS looking West and the newly formed Alliance of Sahel States, consisting of many coup leaders, looking east to the Russian Federation.

Moreover, military regimes have turned their backs on long-standing military alliances and regional counter-terrorism mechanisms. For instance:

- Mali forced the withdrawal of the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission from the country and got French and U.S. forces to exit the region.
- Cooperation with the Multinational Joint Task Force which included Benin, Cameroon, Chad, Niger and Nigeria, as a response force to the threat posed by Boko Haram has ended.
- The Sahel G-5, in which Chad, Mali, Mauritania, Burkina Faso and Niger partnered with France to fight terror groups across the region, is no longer functional.³¹

At a time when their own armed forces are not up to the challenge of taking the fight to the jihadists, these countries not only withdrew from international counter-terrorism efforts but also abandoned regional mechanisms. This has undoubtedly strengthened jihadist groups in the region. The foreign dimension of this regional quagmire is discussed further below.

5. Breaking Ranks with African Regional Organizations

The military coups in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger suspended most of the democratic procedures and institutions in those countries despite commitments made by the new military leaders to set dates for democratic elections after a transitional period. To date, elections have yet to take place in any of the three countries. The coups prompted widespread global and regional condemnation, together with calls for reinstatement of democratic governance. African organizations such as the African Union (AU) and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) immediately responded to the coups by suspending membership of the three nations.³²

While the suspensions were considered a temporary measure and a coercive incentive to restore democratic institutions, the military leadership in the three countries remained defiant and has refused to take steps toward this goal. In response, ECOWAS chose to escalate its response further by issuing economic and travel sanctions on Niger and threatened military intervention if the coup leaders in the country did not release the former president from custody and restore the democratically elected government. However, following their suspension from the organization, Mali and Burkina Faso, opted to undermine ECOWAS's authority and support the military regime in Niger by declaring that any armed action against the country would be considered an act of war against them. This led to the ECOWAS deadline passing without any action.³³

Under continued pressure by various African and international actors to transition toward democratic elections and struggling to curb jihadist insurgency in their

territories, the military juntas in the three countries signed a security pact known as the Alliance of Sahel States (AES). The pact promised mutual assistance in the event of internal or external security threats. In addition to its security aspects, the AES also allowed the military leaderships of the three countries to bolster the legitimacy of their governments amid sanctions and international pressure.

Emboldened by this agreement, toward the end of 2023, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger announced their withdrawal from regional counter-insurgency initiatives such as the G5 Sahel force and the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), effectively leading to their dissolution. A few months later, the three countries also declared they would exit ECOWAS and further strengthen their alliance despite attempts by ECOWAS to lower tensions by lifting sanctions and pushing for renewed dialogue with the trio of nations.³⁴

6. France and the U.S. Exit the Sahel

A significant development that became apparent during and after the coups in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger – the AES countries – was a series of official statements and popular protests opposing Western involvement and influence. These calls culminated in the cessation of Western-led joint counter-terrorism operations in the Sahel and the withdrawal of U.S. and European (mainly French) troops from the region.

Historically, the AES countries were French colonies and after gaining independence they chose to maintain strong ties with France. In response to the rise of jihadist insurgency in Mali and a subsequent request for assistance, France led two major military operations in the country: Operation Serval (2012-2014) and Operation Barkhane (2014-2022). However, as the insurgencies intensified and the missions failed to achieve their objectives, France's activities in Mali lost the confidence and support of parts of the population and leading political and military figures.

The military coup in Mali in 2021 and the junta's subsequent refusal to restore civilian rule led France to suspend joint military operations with the Malian forces. Although

these operations were later renewed, tensions between the sides persisted and the Malian government demanded that France withdraw its forces "without delay." French troops officially departed Mali in August 2022, with most of the remaining forces relocating to Niger. The following year saw French forces leave Burkina Faso and Niger after the new military juntas in both countries demanded their withdrawal and the termination of joint operations.³⁵

The United States was the most significant international actor involved in counter-terrorism operations in the Sahel prior to the military coups. Following the coups, the U.S. presence in the AES countries was regarded by the juntas as an obstacle to counter-insurgency efforts in the Sahel – as had been the case with France. Niger in particular had been central to U.S. operations and strategy in the region, as it hosted most of its forces, including drone and air force bases.

Following the coup in Niger (2023), the U.S. called for restoration of democratic governance and the release of the ousted president Mohamed Bazoum from custody. These calls, however, were perceived by the new Nigerien regime as a blatant interference in the political system amid a delicate situation.³⁶ Although initially trying to preserve ties with Niger, during the early months of 2024, the U.S. took a tougher stance amid reports of Niger seeking closer collaboration with Russia and Iran (see below).

Tensions escalated further in March 2024, when Niger canceled all defense agreements with the U.S., raising questions about the deployment of the remaining American forces in the country. Niger appeared to be attempting a balancing act – enhancing cooperation with like-minded authoritarian regimes, such as Russia and Iran, while still preserving ties with the U.S. and European partners. This strategy ended abruptly in April 2024, when Niger filed a formal demand to terminate the U.S. military presence. The remaining American forces in Niger completed their withdrawal in September 2024, marking the end of American military presence in the AES countries.³⁷

7. Russia Consolidates its Position

An important factor in Russia's involvement in Africa and its ties with African countries is the absence of a Russian colonial history in the continent. This proved to be crucial when Russia sought to expand its presence in Africa during and after the Cold War. While Moscow played a significant role in supplying weapons and supporting various African political actors, it typically operated covertly without initiating formal interventions along the lines of U.S. involvement in Somalia or the French engagement in the Sahel.³⁸ This strategy allowed Russia to position itself as being on the side of the African anti-colonial movement and countries identifying as part of the "Global South." Highlighting this, Russia portrayed itself as the vanguard of the "global majority" and claimed to lead "the objective process of building a more just multipolar world."³⁹

In the aftermath of the May 2021 coup in Mali, demonstrations were held across various cities in the country to show support for the new regime. Alongside the many Malian flags on display, Russian flags were also waved.⁴⁰ This served as an early indication that the new regime sought to replace its longstanding French ally/patron (or at least "diversify" its alliances) with the authoritarian regime of Vladimir Putin. There was even speculation that the leaders of the earlier 2020 coup that toppled Mali's democratically-elected government received training in Russia before returning to Mali and staging the coup.⁴¹ The first months following the 2021 coup saw French forces begin to withdraw from Mali, while reports emerged of Russian Wagner Group mercenaries arriving in the country to replace the French in the fight against the jihadist insurgency and as instructors for local security forces.⁴²

A key factor in Russia's penetration into Mali was the implementation of disinformation campaigns which were subsequently turned against neighboring Burkina Faso and Niger. Through these campaigns Russia continued to strengthen its profile in the Sahel, undermining the authority and popular support of the governments in the two countries and sparking mistrust and hostility toward French and U.S. involvement in the region.⁴³ In the aftermath of the September 2022 coup in Burkina Faso – the second

in the country in that year), demonstrations erupted in support of the new leaders, with Russian flags once again prominently displayed. Russia was quick to react (albeit unofficially), with Wagner Force founder, Yevgeny Prigozhin, "warmly congratulating" the coup leaders.⁴⁴ The leaders of the 2023 coup in Niger followed the same playbook by aligning with Russia unofficially through pro-Russian demonstrations and covert appeals for aid from the Wagner Group following ECOWAS's threat of military intervention in the wake of the coup.⁴⁵

As French and U.S. forces withdrew from the AES countries, Russian forces – now operating under a Russian umbrella entity going by the name Africa Corps following the death of Prigozhin – were invited by the juntas to take their place. In one instance, Russian troops arrived at a military base in Niger while U.S. troops were still present.⁴⁶ Russia was now pursuing two ventures in the Sahel: First, the Africa Corps was conducting joint counter-terrorism operations with local security forces, while also expanding disinformation campaigns to further undermine Western influence in the region. These efforts were occasionally supplemented by illicit activities such as smuggling and money laundering. Second, Russia established unconditional partnerships with the AES countries, positioning itself as the preferred – and often the sole – international partner for nations facing isolation and sanctions, especially after the French and U.S. withdrawals. During 2024, Russia signed several bilateral agreements to provide military training and equipment. In some cases, these deals were reportedly made in exchange for access to strategically important natural resources such as gold and uranium.⁴⁷

When examining Russian involvement in the Sahel, it is important to consider the context of the war in Ukraine. It is plausible to assume that the significant increase in Russian activity in this region is connected to the war, the extensive sanctions imposed on Russia and the diplomatic isolation that followed the invasion. Russia aimed to bypass these obstacles by supporting the coups and collaborating with the new regimes to enhance its reputation and economic opportunities.⁴⁸ However, the war

soon followed Russia to the Sahel. In July 2024, Ukraine's military intelligence agency claimed involvement in an ambush near the Malian-Algerian border that resulted in dozens of casualties among Africa Corps (Wagner Group) and Malian armed forces. A spokesperson for the Ukrainian agency stated that the Malian insurgents who carried out the ambush had received the "necessary" information. In response, Mali severed diplomatic relations with Ukraine, and Niger soon followed suit. The AES countries submitted a petition to the UN Security Council denouncing Ukraine's "open support for international terrorism". Ukraine denied these allegations, as well as later claims that it had supplied drones to insurgents in Mali.⁴⁹

8. Involvement of Other International Actors

While much of the focus on the foreign dimension of the security crisis in the Sahel centers on Russia, the U.S. and France due to their "boots on the ground" presence in the region, other important actors are involved. Turkey is perhaps the most active. It was selling military equipment to the AES countries even before the coups, but recent reports suggest it has stepped up its involvement through a Turkish private military company called Sadat International Defense Company, which is believed to have close ties to the Turkish government. Sadat has reportedly deployed pro-Turkish Syrian mercenaries to Burkina Faso and Niger and trained pro-government forces in Mali. Sadat forces are supposedly stationed in those countries to protect Turkish sites and interests; however, it is believed that these forces have been deployed in battles against insurgents and anti-government groups.⁵⁰ Another important actor in the region is China, which is also engaged in military and security endeavors in the region following the coups. Through the state-owned China North Industries Corporation (*Norinco*), China has signed deals with Mali and Burkina Faso to provide them with military equipment, technology and training.⁵¹

Iran, meanwhile, has also turned to the Sahel to bolster its international legitimacy, circumvent sanctions against it, and expand its commercial exports. The coup leaders' anti-neocolonial and anti-Western influence encouraged Iran to engage in diplomatic

and military efforts in the region. These efforts reportedly culminated, inter alia, in a \$56 million deal with Niger to acquire 300 tons of Nigerien refined uranium in exchange for Iranian drones and surface-to-air missiles.⁵² Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) also maintain ties with the AES countries, but the UAE is the only one of these parties known to have security agreements with them. Interestingly, these agreements were signed before the coups happened, but the UAE chose to maintain them and delivered armored vehicles to Mali and Burkina Faso.⁵³ Qatar is also involved in the region, however, despite its formal ties with the AES countries, a recently leaked Qatari government document reportedly revealed that it has funneled \$15 million to Islamic opposition organizations in northern Mali such as the Tuareg separatists and al-Qaeda-linked groups.⁵⁴

9. Implications for Israel's Interests

Israel has no official ties with the AES countries, neither before nor after the coups. Although Israel was not directly involved in the region, the coups and the events that followed them exacerbated anti-Western and anti-American sentiments, which in turn fueled anti-Israeli sentiments – especially in light of the ongoing war in the Middle East. Events in the Sahel and the expansion of jihadist insurgencies in the region have nevertheless affected Israeli interests, as Jerusalem maintains ties with countries neighboring the AES nations and others with ties with Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. Jihadist activities have increasingly spread to the territories of West African coastal states in recent years, although as yet they do not pose a significant security threat. Chief among these countries are Senegal, Côte d’Ivoire, and Ghana⁵⁵ which are major actors with diplomatic ties to Israel. While these countries have not yet experienced major and continuous jihadist activities, jihadist groups are already operating regularly near their borders.⁵⁶ Neighboring Niger, Chad and Nigeria have maintained ties with Israel for years. Chad aimed to open an embassy in Israel just before the Gaza War erupted but has since put its plans on hold. Chad and Nigeria have so far avoided

spillover of jihadist activities from the AES countries; however, such activities have recently expanded to Nigeria's borders.⁵⁷

From the perspective of Israel's interests, the reduced U.S. presence in the Sahel – particularly the withdrawal of U.S. forces and their replacement with Russian (and reportedly Turkish) forces and mercenaries, will likely hamper Israel's cooperation with partners in the Sahel, especially given the ongoing conflict in the Middle East. Nevertheless, Israel's military and security expertise in dealing with terrorist activity may become sought-after merchandise in the event that jihadist activity spreads to its partners' territories. Furthermore, Israel's ties with Muslim nations collaborating and dealing with the Sahel countries, especially the UAE, may enable it to enhance its commercial and diplomatic presence in the region.

10. Recommendations

Measured in terms of the number of attacks, and their lethality, the Sahel has become the epicenter of global jihadism.

Despite pressing challenges elsewhere, the international community cannot afford to ignore the Sahel due to the risk of contagion. This is especially critical given the close working relationships between local jihadist groups and international terror networks like Al Qaeda and Islamic State. This, of course, raises the question of what constitutes the “international community” given the fact that we have a new Cold War playing out in the deserts of the Sahel as graphically illustrated by the growing tensions between ECOWAS and the Alliance of Sahel States.

Given the rapidly escalating jihadist threat, it is imperative that these Sahelian states unite to confront it. The United Nations might consider taking a leadership role here despite its unflattering exit from Mali. The reality is that the military juntas who have come to power have fared no better than the civilian governments they overthrew when it comes to combatting the Islamist threat.

Those seeking to halt the jihadist juggernaut must recognize and accept the existence of a regional security complex, and that the threat will need to be dealt with across borders, and spanning military, developmental and governance dimensions.

While the terror groups seem to be in ascendancy at present, the reality is they suffer from several weaknesses which can be exploited. First, there are growing tensions between Al Qaeda and Islamic State affiliates. Second, Islamists have cynically manipulated ethnic identities to bolster recruitment. Much can be done by states to create inclusive societies in the long term while focusing on development initiatives in the short term to diminish the appeal of these groups. Third, while seemingly omnipresent, the terrorists are concentrated in specific geographical locations. Boko Haram, for instance, operates primarily in the Sambisa Forest and the Mandara Mountains. Military forces can be concentrated in those areas. Fourth, terror groups are dependent on criminal activities and ties to organized crime syndicates. By severing these ties, security forces could significantly deplete the financial resources of these terrorist groups.

Although Israel is not directly involved in the fight against the jihadist insurgency in the Sahel, its interests in the region will be significantly affected by the course of this fight. Failure to curb these jihadist activities will undermine the support and legitimacy of the new military regimes and the international actors that back them, particularly Russia. Additionally, failure to tackle jihadist activities will expose neighboring countries, especially Muslim nations, to the spread of jihadist operations to their territories. Some of these countries maintain strong ties with Israel. On the other hand, a successful campaign against jihadist activities in the Sahel may lead to the consolidation of the military regimes and the expansion of Russian involvement in the region, further distancing the influence of the U.S. and Europe – and, by extension, Israel's influence.

While direct involvement, whether overt or covert, in the conflict would likely be counterproductive, Israel should strive to strengthen its ties with coastal West African



nations and with other neighboring countries such as Chad. Special attention should be given to strengthening security forces in those countries; as security services/training is a "product" Israel has expertise in, and these forces are crucial for countering jihadist activities and preventing political instability.

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