

To What Extent Do Political Instability and Coups D'état Contribute to the Proliferation and Resilience of Terrorist Groups in The Sahel Region?¹

Abraham Ename Minko²

Abstract:

The Sahel region faces a complex nexus of political instability and terrorism, with the former often exacerbating the latter. This research delves into the extent to which political turmoil and coups d'état contribute to the proliferation and resilience of terrorist groups in the Sahel. Beginning with an analysis of the relationship between political instability and terrorist group proliferation, the study examines how periods of governance vacuum and instability create fertile ground for extremist ideologies to take root. Drawing on historical data and case studies from countries such as Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, the research highlights how political upheavals provide terrorist groups with opportunities for recruitment, funding, and operational expansion. Moreover, the study explores the role of external powers, such as France, and the United States, and regional organizations like the African Union and ECOWAS, in shaping the security landscape of the Sahel. It scrutinizes the effectiveness of foreign interventions, aid, and development programs in addressing the underlying socio-economic grievances that fuel terrorism. Furthermore, the research critically analyses the humanitarian consequences of displacement and refugee crises resulting from terrorist activities and state responses. It underscores the importance of cross-border collaboration and regional security architecture, examining initiatives like the G5 Sahel Joint Force and the Lake Chad Basin Commission Multinational Joint Task Force in countering terrorism. By shedding light on the intricate dynamics between political instability and terrorism in the Sahel, this study aims to inform more targeted and effective strategies for countering extremism and promoting stability in the region.

Keywords:

Sahel region; Political instability; Terrorism; Resilience; Regional cooperation.

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² Senior Researcher and Policy Analyst /Ph.D. Candidate in Political Science and International Relations. Istanbul University. Turkiye; ORCID: 0009-0008-0565-0973; abrahamminko@gmail.com.



Introduction

The Relationship Between Political Instability and Terrorist Group Proliferation

Historical and Socio-Political Context

The Sahel region, an arid expanse stretching across North Africa from the Atlantic Ocean to the Red Sea, has long been a crucible of political instability and conflict. The historical and socio-political context of the Sahel is marked by a legacy of colonialism, ethnic fragmentation, and weak state institutions, all of which have contributed to the proliferation and resilience of terrorist groups in the area. The disintegration of centralized power and the frequent occurrence of coups d'état have created an environment where terrorist organizations can thrive.

For instance, Mali provides a stark example of how political instability facilitates terrorist activities. In 2012, a coup led by Captain Amadou Sanogo overthrew the government, exploiting widespread discontent over the handling of a Tuareg rebellion in the north. This political vacuum allowed various terrorist groups, including Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and Ansar Dine, to seize control of northern Mali, declaring it an Islamic state. The weakened central government, preoccupied with internal power struggles, was unable to mount an effective response, enabling these groups to entrench themselves. The international intervention led by France in 2013 pushed back the militants but did not eradicate them, highlighting the resilience these groups gain from exploiting political turmoil.

Burkina Faso offers another illustrative case. The country has experienced multiple coups since gaining independence from France in 1960, the most recent being in 2022. Each coup further destabilized the political landscape, weakening state structures and diminishing public trust in government institutions. This persistent instability has been a boon for terrorist groups such as Ansarul Islam and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), which have capitalized on the government's inability to control vast rural areas. These groups have leveraged local grievances, including ethnic tensions and economic disenfranchisement, to bolster their ranks and expand their influence (Abdoul et al., 2021).

Niger, similarly, has faced chronic political instability and coups, most notably in 1996, 1999, and 2010. The aftermath of these coups often left the country in disarray, with weakened governance and security structures. Boko Haram and ISGS have exploited these conditions, especially in the border regions, where state presence is minimal. The repeated cycles of political upheaval have hampered development efforts, exacerbated poverty, and fostered a sense of neglect among the population, conditions that terrorist organizations skilfully exploit for recruitment and support. These examples underscore a critical dynamic: political instability and coups d'état in the Sahel create power vacuums and governance failures that terrorist groups exploit to establish and expand their presence (Charbonneau, 2017). The socio-political fabric of the Sahel,

characterized by ethnic diversity and historical marginalization, further complicates the situation. Terrorist groups adeptly navigate and manipulate these complexities, presenting themselves as alternatives to ineffective and corrupt governments. This historical and socio-political context is essential for understanding the persistence and proliferation of terrorism in the Sahel, as it highlights the deep-rooted issues that go beyond mere military solutions and call for comprehensive political and social interventions.

Case Studies of Specific Countries

Examining the Sahel region through case studies of specific countries reveals how political instability and coups d'état have directly contributed to the proliferation and resilience of terrorist groups. Mali stands out as a critical example where a series of political disruptions has paved the way for terrorist activities. The 2012 coup, led by Captain Amadou Sanogo, epitomizes this connection. The coup was fuelled by dissatisfaction with the government's handling of the Tuareg rebellion in the north. The subsequent power vacuum allowed groups like Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and Ansar Dine to take over large swaths of territory. The Malian state's fragmentation and the ensuing chaos provided these groups with the perfect opportunity to establish control, enforce their rule, and gain local support by exploiting ethnic and socio-economic grievances. Despite international military interventions, these groups have shown remarkable resilience, continually resurfacing and adapting to new security measures.

Burkina Faso's experience mirrors Mali's in many ways, showcasing how repeated political upheaval can undermine state authority and enable terrorist expansion. Following the ousting of President Blaise Compaoré in 2014 after 27 years in power, Burkina Faso entered a period of significant instability. The power vacuum and the transitional government's weaknesses were exploited by groups like Ansarul Islam and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS). The 2015 coup attempt further destabilized the country, allowing these terrorist organizations to gain a foothold, particularly in the northern regions. These groups capitalized on local grievances, including disputes over land and resources, and marginalized communities' frustrations with the central government's neglect. The state's inability to provide security and basic services in these areas has allowed terrorist groups to present themselves as viable alternatives, thereby strengthening their influence and control.

Niger also exemplifies the detrimental impact of political instability on counter-terrorism efforts. The country has endured several coups since its independence, with notable ones in 1996, 1999, and 2010. These political disruptions have consistently weakened the state apparatus, leaving large areas under-governed and vulnerable to terrorist infiltration. Boko Haram and ISGS have exploited these conditions, particularly in the Diffa region bordering Nigeria. The repeated coups have hampered Niger's ability to maintain a robust security presence in these areas, allowing terrorist groups to operate with relative impunity. Additionally, the socio-economic challenges resulting from

political instability, such as unemployment and lack of education, have made the population susceptible to recruitment by these terrorist organizations.

These case studies highlight a recurring theme: political instability, marked by coups and weak governance, directly facilitates the proliferation and resilience of terrorist groups in the Sahel. Each instance of political turmoil creates opportunities for these groups to exploit power vacuums, deepen local grievances, and expand their operational capacities. The situations in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger underscore the complex interplay between political instability and terrorism, illustrating how the breakdown of state structures and authority can have far-reaching consequences for regional security. This analysis calls for a multifaceted approach to counterterrorism that addresses not only the immediate security challenges but also the underlying political and socio-economic factors contributing to instability in the Sahel.

Mechanisms Through Which Political Instability Supports Terrorist Resilience

Recruitment and Radicalization

The process of recruitment and radicalization in the Sahel region is deeply intertwined with the socio-political environment marked by instability, economic hardship, and ethnic tensions. Terrorist groups in the region, such as Boko Haram, Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), have adeptly exploited these conditions to bolster their ranks and entrench their influence.

In Nigeria, Boko Haram's recruitment strategies illustrate how political instability and socio-economic disenfranchisement fuel radicalization. The group's emergence and growth can be traced back to widespread corruption, poor governance, and a lack of economic opportunities, particularly in the northeastern regions. Boko Haram capitalized on these grievances by presenting itself as an alternative to the failing state (Fischer, 2017). The group targeted disaffected youth, offering them not only financial incentives but also a sense of belonging and purpose. The abduction and indoctrination of young people, often from marginalized communities, highlight the desperate conditions that make radicalization a viable option for many. Additionally, Boko Haram has utilized propaganda to tap into religious and ethnic sentiments, framing its cause as a fight against both Western influence and the corrupt Nigerian state.

Mali offers another poignant example where recruitment and radicalization have been driven by a combination of political instability and ethnic strife. The 2012 coup and the subsequent Tuareg rebellion created an environment of chaos and uncertainty. Terrorist groups like AQIM and Ansar Dine exploited this turmoil, recruiting from both the local Tuareg population and other marginalized groups. These organizations provided financial support, security, and a semblance of order in regions where the state's presence was minimal. Furthermore, they leveraged existing ethnic tensions, promising autonomy and respect for local customs and grievances. The failure of the Malian government to address the needs of these communities effectively pushed many

towards radicalization, viewing it as a means of securing their rights and livelihoods (Benedikter et al., 2018).

In Burkina Faso, the rapid rise of terrorist activities post-2014 can be attributed to successful recruitment and radicalization efforts in the wake of political instability. Following the ousting of long-time President Blaise Compaoré, the transitional government struggled to establish control, particularly in the northern regions. Groups like Ansarul Islam exploited the power vacuum and the local population's dissatisfaction with the central government. They focused on recruiting from marginalized communities, particularly among the Fulani, who faced ethnic discrimination and economic neglect (Erforth, 2018). By addressing local grievances and providing social services, these terrorist groups positioned themselves as legitimate alternatives to the state. This strategy not only increased their numbers but also deepened their integration into local communities, making counter-terrorism efforts more challenging.

The situation in Niger further underscores the critical role of socio-economic factors in recruitment and radicalization. The repeated political upheavals and chronic poverty have created a fertile ground for terrorist recruitment. Groups such as Boko Haram and ISGS have targeted economically disenfranchised youth, offering them financial stability and a sense of purpose. The lack of educational and employment opportunities, exacerbated by political instability, leaves many young people vulnerable to radicalization. Additionally, these groups exploit local grievances, such as land disputes and ethnic tensions, to foster a sense of injustice and mobilize recruits against perceived enemies.

The recruitment and radicalization of individuals in the Sahel region are intricately linked to pervasive political instability, economic deprivation, and social marginalization (Wing, 2018). Terrorist groups have effectively exploited these conditions, using a combination of financial incentives, ideological indoctrination, and addressing local grievances to attract and radicalize new members. These dynamics highlight the need for a comprehensive approach to counter-terrorism that not only addresses security concerns but also tackles the underlying socio-economic and political issues that facilitate recruitment and radicalization in the first place.

Funding and Resource Acquisition

In the Sahel region, the funding and resource acquisition strategies of terrorist groups are deeply intertwined with the prevailing political instability and economic fragility. Terrorist organizations like Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Boko Haram, and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) have developed sophisticated methods to finance their operations, capitalizing on the weaknesses of state institutions and the chaotic socio-political environment.

Mali provides a salient example of how terrorist groups exploit state instability for financial gain. Following the 2012 coup and subsequent insurgencies, northern Mali fell into a state of lawlessness. AQIM and its affiliates took advantage of the power vacuum to establish control over key smuggling routes. These routes, which traverse the vast Saharan landscape, are vital for trafficking drugs, weapons, and human beings. AQIM,



for instance, has profited significantly from the cocaine trade, with the drug often originating in Latin America and transiting through West Africa to Europe. The lack of effective government oversight and widespread corruption have allowed these activities to flourish. Additionally, the kidnapping of Westerners for ransom has been a lucrative source of income for AQIM. High-profile abductions not only bring in substantial ransom payments but also serve to protect the group's power and influence.

In Nigeria, Boko Haram's funding mechanisms illustrate how terrorist groups exploit local economies and weaknesses in state control (Ajala, 2021). Boko Haram has diversified its income sources to include extortion, robbery, and cattle rustling. The group targets local businesses and wealthy individuals, demanding protection money and engaging in outright theft. In areas where state authority is weak or absent, Boko Haram imposes taxes on local communities, coercing residents to pay in return for security or leniency. This parasitic relationship drains local economies and further entrenches the group's presence. Furthermore, Boko Haram has also benefited from funding linked to illicit oil bunkering and the black-market sale of petroleum products, exploiting the instability in Nigeria's oil-rich regions.

Burkina Faso's experience highlights another dimension of resource acquisition through the exploitation of artisanal mining (Benedikter et al., 2018). Following the political upheaval in 2014 and the subsequent weakening of state structures, terrorist groups such as ISGS have targeted the gold mining sector. Artisanal mining, which is often informal and unregulated, has become a major source of revenue for these groups. They impose taxes on miners, control access to mining sites, and engage in direct extraction. This control over gold mining not only provides substantial financial resources but also enhances the groups' influence over local economies and communities. The revenue generated is used to fund their operations, purchase weapons, and recruit fighters, thereby sustaining their insurgency efforts.

In Niger, the pervasive instability and porous borders have facilitated the smuggling of various goods, which in turn funds terrorist activities. ISGS and Boko Haram have exploited Niger's position as a transit hub for smuggling routes that include human trafficking, narcotics, and contraband goods. The revenue from these illicit activities supports their logistical needs, from acquiring weapons and ammunition to funding recruitment drives. Additionally, terrorist groups have benefited from the cattle rustling trade, particularly in regions where traditional pastoralist routes cross international borders. This trade not only finances their operations but also disrupts local economies, exacerbating tensions and creating further instability that terrorist groups can exploit.

These examples from Mali, Nigeria, Burkina Faso, and Niger demonstrate how terrorist groups in the Sahel effectively capitalize on political instability and weak governance to fund their operations. Their ability to control smuggling routes, exploit local economies and engage in various illicit activities underscores the complex interplay between state fragility and terrorism financing. Addressing these funding mechanisms requires a multifaceted approach that includes strengthening state institutions,

improving border security, and fostering economic development to reduce the vulnerabilities that terrorist groups exploit for resource acquisition.

International Influence and Foreign Intervention

Role of External Powers

The role of external powers in the Sahel region is a crucial aspect that influences the proliferation and resilience of terrorist groups (Wing, 2018). Foreign interventions, particularly by France and the United States, have significantly impacted the dynamics of terrorism in the region. However, these interventions often yield mixed results, sometimes stabilizing the situation temporarily but also exacerbating local grievances and fuelling anti-foreign sentiments that terrorist groups exploit.

France's military intervention in Mali in 2013, known as Operation Serval, aimed to drive out Islamist militants who had taken control of the northern part of the country following a coup. While the operation initially succeeded in dispersing the militants and retaking major cities, it did not eradicate the terrorist threat. The intervention led to a prolonged presence of French troops in the region under Operation Barkhane, which has faced increasing criticism and resistance from local populations (Pérouse de Montclos, 2021). The presence of foreign troops has sometimes been perceived as an infringement on national sovereignty and has been used by terrorist groups like Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) to bolster their recruitment narratives, portraying themselves as defenders against foreign occupation.

The United States has also played a significant role through its counter-terrorism initiatives, primarily by providing training, intelligence, and logistical support to Sahelian countries. The U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM) has been instrumental in building the capacities of local military forces. However, the effectiveness of this support is often undermined by the political instability and corruption within these countries. For instance, despite substantial U.S. assistance, the security situation in Niger remains precarious, with frequent attacks by Boko Haram and ISGS. The high-profile ambush of U.S. Special Forces in Niger in 2017 underscored the volatility of the region and the limitations of foreign military assistance in stabilizing it.

The involvement of international organizations, such as the United Nations and the European Union, has also been pivotal in addressing the security and humanitarian crises in the Sahel. The UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) has been deployed since 2013 to support political processes and stabilize the country. However, MINUSMA has faced significant challenges, including frequent attacks on peacekeepers and logistical difficulties. The mission's limited mandate and the complex security environment have hindered its ability to bring about lasting peace. Moreover, the reliance on foreign peacekeeping forces has sometimes led to a lack of ownership of the security processes by local governments, undermining long-term sustainability.



Additionally, regional organizations like the African Union (AU) and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) have attempted to coordinate responses to the security threats in the Sahel. The G5 Sahel Joint Force, composed of troops from Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger, represents a regional effort to combat terrorism and transnational crime. Despite its potential, the G5 Sahel Joint Force has struggled with inadequate funding, logistical constraints, and coordination issues. The reliance on external donors for financial and technical support has also raised concerns about the sustainability and effectiveness of the force (Önal et al., 2021).

These examples illustrate the complex role of external powers in the Sahel region. While foreign interventions and support have been crucial in countering immediate terrorist threats, they often fail to address the underlying issues of governance, economic development, and social cohesion that fuel terrorism. Moreover, the presence of foreign military forces and the dependence on international assistance can exacerbate local grievances and provide fodder for terrorist propaganda. Therefore, a more nuanced approach that combines security measures with efforts to strengthen local governance, promote economic development, and foster regional cooperation is essential for achieving long-term stability in the Sahel.

Aid and Development Programs

Aid and development programs in the Sahel region play a critical role in addressing the root causes of instability and terrorism, yet their effectiveness varies significantly due to a range of complex factors (Kfir, 2018). These programs, often spearheaded by international organizations and donor countries, aim to alleviate poverty, improve governance, and provide essential services. However, the success of these initiatives is frequently undermined by the region's political instability, corruption, and challenging security environment.

One illustrative example is the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) initiatives in Mali, which focus on poverty reduction, governance improvement, and conflict resolution. Despite the substantial financial investment and the implementation of various projects aimed at fostering economic development and social cohesion, the impact has been limited. Political instability, especially following the 2012 coup and the ongoing insurgency in the north, has hindered the effective deployment and sustainability of these programs. The persistent insecurity has restricted the movement of aid workers and disrupted project timelines, thereby reducing the overall efficacy of development efforts. Moreover, the local government's limited capacity to absorb and effectively utilize aid exacerbates the situation, often resulting in mismanagement and corruption, which further alienates the local population and fuels grievances that terrorist groups exploit.

In Niger, the World Bank has been active in promoting agricultural development and food security, crucial given the country's dependency on subsistence farming (Abdoul et al., 2021). Projects aimed at improving irrigation infrastructure, providing access to agricultural inputs, and offering training to farmers have the potential to significantly

improve livelihoods. However, the persistent threat of attacks by Boko Haram and ISGS in the Diffa region has made it difficult to maintain project continuity and ensure that aid reaches the intended beneficiaries. The instability disrupts markets and agricultural cycles, leading to food insecurity that exacerbates the conditions terrorist groups exploit for recruitment. Furthermore, the local population's distrust of government authorities, often seen as corrupt and ineffective, limits the community engagement necessary for these programs to succeed.

In Burkina Faso, the European Union has funded several initiatives to enhance education and healthcare, addressing long-term developmental challenges that contribute to instability. Programs such as the Emergency Trust Fund for Africa have aimed to provide job opportunities and improve access to education in vulnerable regions (Ajala, 2021). While these initiatives have had some positive impacts, the escalating violence and frequent attacks by terrorist groups such as Ansarul Islam have severely hampered progress. Schools and health centres are often targets of attacks, leading to closures and a breakdown in service delivery. This not only disrupts the benefits of these programs but also deepens the sense of insecurity and neglect among the local population, which terrorist groups leverage to bolster their ranks and support.

The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) has also been involved in various capacity-building projects across the Sahel, focusing on governance and economic development. In Mauritania, for example, USAID has supported programs to improve local governance and increase economic opportunities through vocational training and entrepreneurship support. However, the entrenched issues of political corruption and weak institutional frameworks have limited the effectiveness of these interventions (Touré, 2021). The beneficiaries of these programs often face bureaucratic hurdles and lack the necessary support to translate training into sustainable livelihoods. Consequently, the intended impact of reducing vulnerability to radicalization is diminished, as economic desperation and disenfranchisement persist.

These examples underscore the significant challenges that aid, and development programs face in the Sahel. While they are essential for addressing the underlying socio-economic issues that contribute to instability and terrorism, their success is frequently compromised by political instability, corruption, and security challenges (Charbonneau, 2017). Effective development in the Sahel requires not only substantial financial investment but also a strategic approach that integrates security measures, promotes good governance, and ensures community engagement. Strengthening local institutions, improving transparency, and fostering local ownership of development initiatives are critical for these programs to achieve sustainable, long-term impacts and mitigate the conditions that allow terrorism to thrive.

Impact on Civilian Populations and Humanitarian Consequences

Displacement and Refugee Crises

The displacement and refugee crises in the Sahel region are both a consequence and a catalyst of political instability and terrorist activity. These crises exacerbate existing vulnerabilities and create new opportunities for terrorist groups to recruit and expand their influence. The complex interplay between forced migration, instability, and terrorism highlights the need for a comprehensive approach to address the root causes of displacement and mitigate its impact on regional security (Rudincová, 2017).

In Mali, the conflict that erupted in 2012 led to a massive displacement crisis. The Tuareg rebellion, followed by the Islamist insurgency and the subsequent military coup, forced hundreds of thousands of people to flee their homes. Internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees, primarily fleeing to neighbouring countries such as Burkina Faso, Niger, and Mauritania, found themselves in precarious conditions with limited access to basic services and protection. The instability and lack of governmental control in northern Mali created a power vacuum that terrorist groups like Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and Ansar Dine exploited. These groups offered protection and basic services in exchange for support and loyalty, thus embedding themselves within local communities and refugee populations. The protracted displacement situation has strained host communities and fostered competition over resources, which further fuels grievances and tensions that terrorists can exploit.

Burkina Faso has experienced a significant surge in violence and displacement in recent years. The rise of terrorist attacks by groups such as Ansarul Islam and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) has led to a humanitarian crisis, with over one million people displaced within the country as of 2023. The rapid escalation of violence in regions like the Sahel and Centre-Nord has overwhelmed local authorities and humanitarian organizations, complicating efforts to provide adequate support and security. Displaced populations often seek refuge in urban centres or makeshift camps where living conditions are dire, with limited access to food, water, healthcare, and education. These dire conditions create a fertile ground for terrorist groups to recruit young men who see no future in their current situation. By providing necessities and a sense of purpose, terrorist organizations can strengthen their ranks and expand their influence (Osaherumwen et al., 2018).

In Niger, the displacement crisis is exacerbated by the cross-border activities of Boko Haram and ISGS. The Diffa region, bordering Nigeria and Chad, has been particularly affected by the spillover of violence from Nigeria. Thousands of Nigerians fleeing Boko Haram attacks have sought refuge in Niger, adding to the number of internally displaced Nigeriens. The resulting strain on resources and infrastructure in already impoverished areas has created severe humanitarian challenges. The presence of large, unmonitored refugee and IDP populations provides a fertile ground for terrorist recruitment. Boko Haram, for instance, has been known to exploit the desperation and lack of opportunities among displaced youths, recruiting them with promises of financial incentives and protection.

The refugee crisis in the Sahel also has significant implications for regional security and stability. Refugee camps and displacement sites, often located in remote and under-governed areas, can become hotbeds for radicalization and recruitment (Hardy, 2019). For example, the Mbera camp in Mauritania, which hosts Malian refugees, has faced challenges related to security and infiltration by extremist elements. The camp's isolation and the difficult living conditions make it easier for terrorist groups to operate under the radar and influence vulnerable populations. The lack of effective governance and security oversight in these camps enables terrorist organizations to use them as safe havens and logistical hubs.

These examples from Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger demonstrate the intricate link between displacement and the proliferation of terrorist groups in the Sahel (Pérouse de Montclos, 2021). The displacement crisis not only results from but also contributes to ongoing instability and insecurity. Addressing this issue requires a multi-faceted approach that includes improving the living conditions and security in displacement sites, ensuring access to basic services, and fostering social cohesion between displaced populations and host communities. Moreover, strengthening local governance and enhancing the capacity of state institutions to manage and integrate displaced populations is crucial for preventing the exploitation of these vulnerable groups by terrorist organizations.

Human Rights Violations and Civilian Casualties

Human rights violations and civilian casualties in the Sahel region are both symptomatic of and contributors to the proliferation and resilience of terrorist groups (Erforth, 2018). The widespread abuses committed by both state actors and terrorist organizations have deepened mistrust between the local populations and their governments, thereby creating fertile ground for radicalization and recruitment into terrorist groups.

In Mali, the cycle of violence has been marked by significant human rights violations by both government forces and armed groups. Following the 2012 coup, the Malian military was accused of committing extrajudicial killings, torture, and arbitrary arrests, particularly against ethnic Tuareg and Arab populations suspected of supporting insurgent groups. These actions have exacerbated ethnic tensions and fuelled grievances among communities that feel targeted and marginalized by the state. For example, in the town of Dioura, reports of Malian soldiers executing civilians suspected of being insurgents have stoked fear and resentment. These abuses have driven many young men to join militant groups not necessarily out of ideological commitment but as a form of protection and retribution against state violence (Wing, 2018).

Burkina Faso has similarly witnessed a surge in human rights abuses amid escalating conflict. Security forces, in their efforts to combat terrorist groups, have been implicated in numerous cases of arbitrary detention, torture, and extrajudicial killings. In regions like the Sahel and Centre-Nord, where terrorist activity is rampant, the Burkinabe military has conducted counter-terrorism operations that often result in civilian casualties. These actions have included indiscriminate shelling of villages and summary executions of suspected terrorists, which frequently include innocent civilians. The



massacre in the village of Yirgou in 2019, where security forces and vigilante groups killed over 200 Fulani villagers in retaliation for a terrorist attack, exemplifies the severe consequences of such violations. This incident has not only intensified ethnic tensions but also pushed members of the Fulani community towards radical groups that promise protection and justice (Alda et al., 2014).

In Niger, the conflict with Boko Haram and ISGS has led to numerous reports of human rights abuses by both state forces and militants. Nigerian security forces have been accused of using excessive force, conducting unlawful killings, and engaging in torture during their operations against Boko Haram. The infamous Zinder incident in 2020, where security forces reportedly killed dozens of civilians during a raid on a suspected terrorist hideout, illustrates the brutal tactics often employed. Such actions have had a counterproductive effect, fostering animosity towards the government and sympathy for terrorist groups among the local population. Additionally, Boko Haram's atrocities, including kidnappings, mass executions, and sexual violence, have terrorized communities and further destabilized the region. The group's attack on the village of Toumour in 2020, where dozens of civilians were killed and many homes were destroyed, highlights the indiscriminate violence faced by civilians caught in the conflict.

The pervasive human rights abuses and civilian casualties not only undermine the legitimacy of state authorities but also provide terrorist groups with powerful propaganda tools. These groups often exploit instances of state violence and impunity to recruit new members, portraying themselves as protectors of the oppressed. In Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, terrorist organizations have effectively used narratives of state persecution and injustice to draw support from marginalized communities. The portrayal of government forces as indiscriminate and brutal actors bolsters the appeal of terrorist groups, which promise justice, protection, and a means to avenge the wrongs suffered by their supporters.

Addressing human rights violations and minimizing civilian casualties is crucial for undermining the appeal of terrorist groups in the Sahel (Traoré, 2019). This requires comprehensive reforms within the security forces to ensure accountability and adherence to international human rights standards. Strengthening oversight mechanisms, providing human rights training, and fostering community engagement are essential steps toward rebuilding trust between state authorities and local populations. Moreover, enhancing the capacity of judicial institutions to address grievances and deliver justice can help mitigate the cycle of violence and prevent further radicalization. Ultimately, a holistic approach that combines security efforts with respect for human rights and effective governance is essential for achieving long-term stability and countering terrorism in the Sahel.

Regional Cooperation and Security Architecture

Cross-Border Collaboration

Cross-border collaboration is essential for combating the proliferation and resilience of terrorist groups in the Sahel region (Önal et al., 2021). The porous borders and vast,

ungoverned spaces facilitate the movement of militants, weapons, and resources across national boundaries, making unilateral efforts by individual countries insufficient. Effective regional cooperation among Sahelian states and their neighbours is crucial for addressing the transnational nature of terrorism.

The G5 Sahel Joint Force, comprising military units from Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger, exemplifies an ambitious regional initiative to combat terrorism and transnational organized crime. Established in 2017, the Joint Force aims to enhance coordination and joint operations across borders to dismantle terrorist networks. However, despite its strategic intent, the force has faced significant challenges. Financial constraints, logistical issues, and varying levels of commitment among member states have hampered its effectiveness. For instance, the lack of adequate funding and equipment has limited the Joint Force's operational capabilities, while differing national priorities and political will have often resulted in inconsistent participation and coordination (Fischer, 2017). These issues were evident during a 2018 operation where joint forces struggled to maintain cohesion and communication, leading to operational delays and reduced impact.

The Lake Chad Basin Commission (LCBC) Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF), which includes Nigeria, Niger, Chad, and Cameroon, presents another example of regional collaboration aimed at countering Boko Haram. This initiative has seen some success in reducing the group's territorial control and disrupting its operations. For instance, coordinated military offensives in 2015 and 2016 led to the recapture of significant territories previously held by Boko Haram. However, the MNJTF has also faced considerable obstacles, including logistical coordination, intelligence sharing, and sustained political commitment from member states. The fluctuating commitment levels were particularly evident in 2017 when Nigeria, the lead nation in the fight against Boko Haram, temporarily diverted resources and attention to address other internal security issues, leading to a resurgence of Boko Haram attacks in the Lake Chad region (Hardy, 2019).

The role of international partners, such as the European Union (EU) and the United Nations (UN), in supporting cross-border collaboration is also critical. The EU's support for the G5 Sahel Joint Force through financial assistance and capacity-building initiatives highlights the importance of external aid in bolstering regional security efforts (Touré, 2021). For example, the EU has provided funding for infrastructure, training, and logistical support, aiming to enhance the operational effectiveness of the Joint Force. Despite this support, challenges remain in ensuring the sustainability and local ownership of these initiatives. The reliance on external funding can lead to dependency, which becomes problematic if international attention and resources wane.

Furthermore, the African Union's (AU) Peace and Security Council has attempted to foster greater regional cooperation through initiatives such as the African Standby Force and its regional brigades. While the AU's involvement underscores the importance of a continental approach to security, the implementation has often been hindered by bureaucratic inefficiencies, lack of political cohesion among member states, and limited

resources. The slow deployment of AU forces in critical situations, as seen in the delayed response to escalating violence in northern Mali in 2019, exemplifies these challenges.

The necessity for effective cross-border collaboration extends beyond military cooperation to include intelligence sharing, border security, and socio-economic development initiatives. Enhanced intelligence sharing among Sahelian countries, and their neighbours is vital for pre-empting and disrupting terrorist activities (Rudinová, 2017). However, distrust among states and the lack of standardized communication channels often impede effective information exchange. Efforts to improve border security through joint patrols and monitoring have also faced logistical and political challenges. For instance, the porous borders between Niger and Mali have allowed terrorist groups to move freely, undermining national and regional security efforts.

Moreover, addressing the socio-economic root causes of terrorism requires collaborative development initiatives that transcend national borders (Kfir, 2018). Projects aimed at improving infrastructure, education, and economic opportunities in border regions can help mitigate the factors that contribute to radicalization. The Liptako-Gourma Authority, a regional organization focused on promoting development in the border regions of Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso, is an example of such efforts. Despite its potential, the organization's impact has been limited by insufficient funding, coordination issues, and persistent insecurity in the region.

While cross-border collaboration in the Sahel is essential for effectively combating terrorism, significant challenges impede its success. Addressing these challenges requires sustained political commitment, adequate funding, and the establishment of robust mechanisms for coordination and information sharing (Osaherumwen et al., 2018). By fostering a holistic approach that integrates security measures with development initiatives, Sahelian states, and their partners can enhance regional stability and undermine the conditions that allow terrorism to thrive.

Capacity Building and Governance Reforms

Capacity building and governance reforms are critical components in addressing the root causes of terrorism and promoting stability in the Sahel region. Strengthening the capacity of state institutions and improving governance mechanisms are essential for enhancing security, fostering socio-economic development, and addressing the grievances that fuel extremism.

In Mali, the 2012 coup and subsequent conflict exposed deep-seated governance failures and institutional weaknesses that contributed to the country's instability. To address these challenges, efforts have been made to rebuild state institutions and improve governance at both the national and local levels. For example, the Malian government, with support from international partners such as the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the European Union (EU), has implemented initiatives to enhance the effectiveness and accountability of public administration. These efforts include decentralization reforms aimed at devolving power to local authorities, strengthening their capacity to deliver services, and promoting citizen

participation in decision-making processes (Charbonneau, 2017). However, progress has been slow, and challenges persist, including bureaucratic inefficiencies, corruption, and resistance from entrenched interests.

Similarly, in Niger, capacity-building efforts have focused on strengthening state institutions to improve security and governance (Benedikter et al., 2018). The country has received support from international partners, including the United States through its Security Governance Initiative (SGI), aimed at enhancing security sector reform and promoting good governance. Initiatives such as the creation of specialized units within the security forces, training programs for law enforcement and judicial officials, and the establishment of oversight mechanisms have been implemented to enhance the government's ability to address security threats and uphold the rule of law. However, the effectiveness of these efforts has been hampered by resource constraints, limited institutional capacity, and the persistence of corruption.

Burkina Faso has also embarked on governance reforms to address the underlying drivers of instability and terrorism. The country has undertaken initiatives to strengthen democratic institutions, promote transparency and accountability, and combat corruption. For example, the establishment of the National Anti-Corruption Authority (ANLC) and the adoption of anti-corruption legislation demonstrate the government's commitment to addressing governance challenges. Additionally, efforts to improve public service delivery, enhance access to justice, and promote inclusive development have been prioritized to address the grievances of marginalized communities and reduce the appeal of extremist ideologies. However, progress has been uneven, and challenges remain, including political instability, weak rule of law, and the persistence of patronage networks (Abdoul et al., 2021).

The role of regional organizations such as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the African Union (AU) is instrumental in supporting capacity-building and governance reforms in the Sahel. These organizations provide platforms for dialogue, coordination, and cooperation among member states to address common security challenges. For example, ECOWAS has established mechanisms such as the Early Warning System and the ECOWAS Standby Force to facilitate regional responses to security threats. Additionally, the AU's African Governance Architecture (AGA) promotes democratic governance, human rights, and the rule of law through policy dialogue, capacity-building, and peer review mechanisms. However, the effectiveness of these regional initiatives depends on the political will and commitment of member states to implement reforms and uphold democratic principles.

Capacity building and governance reforms are essential for addressing the root causes of terrorism and promoting stability in the Sahel region. While progress has been made in strengthening state institutions and improving governance mechanisms, significant challenges remain. Addressing corruption, promoting transparency and accountability, and enhancing public service delivery are critical steps in building resilient and inclusive societies that can withstand the threat of extremism. Moreover, regional cooperation

and support from international partners are crucial for sustaining momentum and ensuring that efforts to promote good governance yield tangible results.

Conflict of Interest

The author hereby declares that no competing financial interest exists for this manuscript.

Notes on Contributor

Abraham Ename Minko is a senior researcher and policy analyst in peace, security, and conflict resolution. He holds a bachelor's degree in Peace and Development, and a master's degree in international cooperation, and sustainable development. He is completing a Ph.D. in Political Science and International Relations at Istanbul University in Türkiye. His research interests are UN Peace Operations, Terrorism and Counter Violent Extremism, Peace and Conflict Resolution, Mediation and Negotiation, International Humanitarian Law and Armed Conflicts, Peacekeeping, and Peacebuilding. Email address: abrahamminko@gmail.com

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