Coups and Terror in the Sahel:
Terrorist groups' exploitation of state fragility and ungoverned spaces in Niger and Burkina Faso [1]

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Abstract:

In the Sahel, which refers to the regions of West and Central Africa, coups are increasingly associated with rising state fragility, which fuels the proliferation of terrorist activities and exacerbates instability (Dahiru, 2024; Armed Conflict Location & Event Data, ACLED, 2023). This study explores the relationship between coups, state fragility, and terrorism in the Sahel region, with a focus on Niger and Burkina Faso. It contextualises recent coup attempts and successful seizures of power in West and Central Africa since 2020 within the broader historical landscape of coups on the continent. The study employs a qualitative descriptive approach, integrating a variety of sources such as data from ACLED, scholarly articles, and grey literature such as policy reports and media sources. The study aims to show how the emergence of juntas and the erosion of state stability precipitate the spread of terrorism in the region.

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Introduction

The Sahel region, particularly the two states of Niger and Burkina Faso, has become a focal point of global concern due to the interplay of coups, state fragility, and terrorism. The Sahel region faces numerous challenges, including weak institutions, pervasive poverty, food insecurity, forced migration, cross-border criminal activities, and militant insurgencies, all exacerbated by climate change.[4] The stability of states in this region has become a significant regional and global concern, leading to increased external aid and involvement. In Mali and across the region, military and security measures are being used to prevent crises and address political instability. Recently, there has been a rise in violent incidents such as kidnappings, terrorist attacks, mass killings, and armed conflicts in the Sahel region of Africa, drawing the attention of analysts and policymakers (Berger, 2023; Council on Foreign Relations, CFR, 2024; Institute for Economics & Peace, IEP, 2024). This escalating violence highlights the complexity of the situation in Sahel and underscores the urgent need for coordinated international efforts to address the root causes and restore stability.

Non-state conflicts and the escalation of terrorism often stem from the state's inability to maintain control, signifying a breakdown in the state's exclusive authority over the use of force. In recent years, this region has witnessed a wave of coups that have destabilised governments and created conditions conducive to the rise of terrorist activity and mercenary groups (Romaniuk & Besenyő, 2023; Besenyő & Romaniuk, 2024; Dahiru, 2024). These military coups and terrorist groups have capitalised on the fragility of state institutions and the presence of ungoverned spaces to expand their influence and cause chaos throughout the region. The proliferation of terrorist groups, such as Boko Haram and the Islamic State – Sahel Province (ISSP), has exacerbated these issues, as they have capitalised on the fragility of state institutions and the presence of ungoverned spaces to establish a stronghold in the region (Raleigh et al., 2020). This has led to an escalation of violence, with a significant increase in armed clashes, civilian casualties, and the displacement of populations. This paper examines the exploitation of state fragility and ungoverned spaces by terrorist groups in Niger and Burkina Faso, offering insights into the broader implications for regional and international security.

Coups in the Sahel have disrupted governance and exacerbated state fragility, defined as the inability of a state to perform essential functions and provide basic services to its citizens (Bøås & Strazzari, 2020). For example, terrorist activities, military coups, and violence have significantly impacted state fragility and governance in the Sahel region. Human rights abuses by security forces threaten Security Sector Reform (SSR) progress, fuel recruitment of armed actors, and exacerbate violence, hindering lasting progress (Casola, 2021). The emergence of jihadist groups has also transformed conflicts into intricate networks of local grievances and transnational insurgencies, resulting in a

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[4] For a comprehensive look at the changing landscape of terrorism and insurgency across regions, see Romaniuk et al., 2024).

dysfunctional relationship between states and local populations, which in turn contributes to state fragility (Casola, 2021). The proliferation of armed non-state actors reflects states' weaknesses in maintaining a monopoly of force, exacerbating violence and instability in the region. Terrorist activities, military coups, and violence in the Sahel region have resulted in interconnected challenges such as state fragility, governance issues, and jihadist insurgencies.

The security dynamics in the past decade have led to increased external intervention and international rivalry. The role of extralegal governance in deforming, transforming, and reforming political orders is crucial; it sheds light on the mobilisation of resources (Bøås & Strazzari, 2020). This fragility creates a power vacuum that terrorist groups exploit, further destabilising the region. Understanding the dynamics of these coups and their impact on state stability is crucial for building a deeper awareness about the proliferation of terrorism in the Sahel and elsewhere beyond the region and Africa. As such, efforts to combat terrorism and restore state presence must prioritise improved governance to prevent the emergence of protostate entities (Casola, 2021).

Terrorism in the Sahel is characterised by the activities of groups such as Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM), the ISSP, and Boko Haram, which have taken advantage of weak state structures to establish operational bases and recruit members (Raleigh et al., 2020). This has led to an escalation of violence, with a significant increase in armed clashes, civilian casualties, and the displacement of populations. These groups exploit ungoverned spaces—areas where the government has limited or no control—to conduct their operations, thereby increasing their influence and capability (Bøås & Strazzari, 2020; Nsaibia & Duhamel, 2021; Dahiru, 2024). The relationship between coups, state fragility, and terrorism highlights a vicious cycle of instability that poses significant challenges to regional security.

Despite the gravity of this situation, there is a gap in the existing literature regarding the specific mechanisms through which terrorist groups exploit state fragility and ungoverned spaces following coups. Previous studies have primarily focused on the immediate political and security impacts of coups or the general conditions conducive to terrorism, but few have detailed the interconnected processes that link these phenomena in the Sahel. This study aims to fill this gap by providing a comprehensive analysis of the interactions between these factors. The central issue addressed in this paper, therefore, is the extent to which military coups contribute to state fragility and how this fragility, in turn, facilitates the growth and operations of terrorist groups in Niger and Burkina Faso. This issue is critical for policymakers and international organisations working to stabilise the region and combat terrorism. By elucidating these connections, the study hopes to inform more effective strategies for intervention and support in the Sahel.

The paper is organised as follows: First, it discusses the history of coups in the Sahel and its immediate effects on state stability. It then investigates the growth and actions of terrorist groups in the region, emphasising how they utilise ungoverned space. The

following section evaluates the relationship between state fragility and terrorism, using quantitative data from ACLED and other sources. A general conclusion follows.

Working definitions

The phenomenon of coups generally refers to the sudden, often violent overthrow of an existing government by a small group, typically within the military or political elite. Powell and Thyne define a coup as an illegal and overt attempt by the military or other elites within the state machinery to unseat the sitting executive, which, if successful, lasts at least one week (Powell & Thyne, 2011).

Failed states are closely linked to ungoverned spaces, as both involve the state's inability to provide basic services, maintain internal political stability, and manage tensions between local communities, leading to an environment conducive to recruitment by armed groups and terrorist organisations (Nyadera & Massaoud, 2019; Issaev et al., 2022). When a state fails to ensure law and order, terrorist groups or warlords often step in to provide services, thereby undermining the political system's legitimacy (Cutter, 2003; Terlinden & Debiel, 2003). This failure to effectively govern creates fertile ground for the rise of violent non-state actors (VNSAs), such as rebel groups, militias, criminal networks, and terrorist organisations (Hummel, 2021). The Fragile State Index (FSI), which assesses the condition of states annually based on cohesion and economic, political, and social indicators, is an essential tool for measuring state fragility. This index employs content analysis of qualitative data, triangulated with quantitative data and qualitative research inputs, to understand and address issues of social, economic, and political fragility (IFAD, 2018).

Extremist and terrorist groups have come to challenge state authority in ungoverned spaces, where the state exercises minimal or no control over its territory and population (Lloyd, 2016; Ojo, 2020). The United States (US) Department of Defence (DoS) defines these areas as places where the central government is unable or unwilling to exert control, govern effectively, or influence the local population, often due to inadequate governance capacity, insufficient political will, legitimacy gaps, conflicts, or restrictive norms (Lamb, 2019). These spaces, often found in geographically challenging and sparsely populated areas such as deserts, become breeding grounds for armed groups that challenge the central government, driven by internal divisions, economic stagnation, and perceptions of state weakness (Nyadera & Massaoud, 2019; Bøås & Strazzari, 2020).

The legacy of colonialism has contributed to the creation of ungoverned spaces, as colonial boundaries often did not reflect sociocultural realities, leading to a concentrated state presence in urban centres and leaving vast rural areas under minimal control (UN, 2023). Addressing ungoverned spaces therefore requires a security cooperation program and active development policies to provide public services and deny access to terrorist groups.

Connecting the dots: Linking ungoverned spaces, state fragility/failure, and terrorism

Existing scholarship has presented a variety of ways to understand the relationship between state fragility or weak states and terrorism (see Hagel, 2004; Kittner, 2007; Piazza, 2007; Hewitt et al., 2008; Tikuisis, 2009; Coggins, 2015; George, 2018; Pašagić, 2020), producing ongoing and controversial debates about the causal relationship and factors deserving attention. Some researchers have shown a correlation between fragile regimes and terrorism, whereas others have cast doubt on this idea (for examples, see Hehir, 2007; Newman, 2007). Newman (2007: 483), for example, argues that 'there is not a conclusive relationship between state failure, weak states, and terrorism' while Hehir (2007: 328) asserts that 'there is no causal link or pronounced correlation between failed states and the proliferation of terrorism'. George (2018: 472) reasons that '[i]In failed states, terrorist organisations can lure young people, who feel socially and economically marginalised, to relate to their counterparts across the world and to be part of a global terrorist movement'. Rice (2003: 2) contends that:

> "First, these states provide convenient operational bases and safe havens for international terrorists. Terrorist organizations take advantage of failing states' porous borders, of their weak or non-existent law enforcement and security services, and of their ineffective judicial institutions to move men, weapons and money around the globe. They smuggle out precious resources like diamonds and narcotics that help fund their operations. Terrorist organizations may also recruit foot soldiers from local populations, where poor and disillusioned youth often harbour religious or ethnic grievances. Africa offers several cases in point. Sudan has served as a sanctuary and staging ground for al Qaeda and other global terrorist organizations."

Discussions have coincided with measures and tactics, such as the use of discriminatory or indiscriminate violence or the turn against other groups and labelling competing governments and government groups as terrorists within their own order (as with Myanmar) (Reuters, 2021; Mason, 2022). Scholars and analysts have also attributed terrorism and terrorist related issues to juntas or rebel groups' inability or unwillingness to govern effectively or occupy all aspects of society, including the containment of violence (Africa Defence Forum, ADF, 2024). The instability and unpredictability that accompany the governance of a junta government and rebel groups can be attributed to their strategic decisions or actions driven by necessity. For example, a junta or governing rebel group might choose to partner with other groups that could potentially pose a threat to their security while providing much-needed or desired security in other forms. This was the case with the military coup commanders in Niger, who sought assistance from Wagner mercenaries in 2023 as the deadline for the release of the ousted president drew near (Al Jazeera, 2022).

The resulting state instability, characterised by weakened governance structures and law enforcement, creates voids that terrorist groups can fill by providing alternative ideological structures or positions (see, for example, Omeni & Al Khathlan, 2024). In regions where state stability has eroded, terrorism may thrive due to the absence of effective governance and the breakdown of social contracts between the state and its citizens. Weak states struggle to deliver basic services, and their inability to ensure security can lead to varying degrees of disillusionment among the populace (Rotberg, 2002; World Bank, 2004). These conditions present further opportunities that can be exploited by terrorist groups. They can capitalise on disenfranchised peoples and feelings of fear by offering protection, resources, or ideological narratives that resonate with disenfranchised groups. In such contexts, the state's loss of legitimacy can drive individuals and communities toward extremist ideologies, thereby facilitating the recruitment and expansion of terrorist networks.

Additionally, the use of repressive measures by juntas and rebel groups can further destabilise regions by intensifying alienation, which in turn can lead to civil unrest and present terrorism as an appealing form of resistance. This self-reinforcing cycle of instability, repression, and terrorism can further undermine regional security, as state failure or fragility and a breakdown in governance capacity often coincide with porous borders that facilitate the movement of terrorists and criminals, along with their essential resources such as weapons, narcotics, money, and smuggled people. This is in line with Okereke et al.'s (2016) identification of state fragility, porous borders, armed conflicts, and ungoverned spaces as facilitators of terrorism in Africa.

Military coups often result in the concentration of power among a few elites, leading to the marginalisation of specific groups and the breakdown of democratic, and thus inclusive, institutions (Puccetti, 2021). This concentration of power undermines inclusive governance and exacerbates societal grievances that terrorist organisations can exploit by positioning themselves as alternatives to corrupt or ineffective state structures (Rotberg, 2002; Puccetti, 2021). The instability and unpredictability resulting from coups weaken the state apparatus and their ability to maintain law and order, potentially creating a vacuum that terrorist groups can exploit.

Moreover, human rights abuses, increased violence, and the alienation of large segments of the population, particularly in areas already prone to conflict, inherently link repression (Rössel, 2002). As a result of this repression and the erosion of state stability, groups opposing the junta or seeking to exploit the chaos thrive, finding a receptive audience among those disillusioned by the junta's actions (Dahiru, 2024). These conditions and their intermingling have played out in the Sahel. As armed violence continues to rise, there is a worsening crisis in Africa's Central Sahel region, most notably Niger and Burkina Faso (Dahiru, 2024). Within the Sahel region in general, and these states specifically, the cycle of instability, repression, and terrorism has appeared to be self-reinforcing, further undermining regional security.

Therefore, one of the key elements that accelerates the growth of terrorism is the rise of juntas and rebel organizations and the ensuing decline in state stability. This is the case in the Sahel, where there is ample evidence of the rise in military coups.

Historical background of coups in the Sahel and their impact on state stability

Repeated coups have severely impacted state stability in the Sahel region's turbulent history. State fragility significantly contributes to the spread of extremism and generally manifests through corruption, repression, poor governance, inadequate public services, and a lack of accountability. These factors consistently lead to the rise of extremism and recruitment into terrorist groups across various regions worldwide (Yacoubian, 2023). State fragility is a crucial factor in enabling terrorism, particularly in Africa, West Africa, and the Sahel region. Terrorist organisations exploit weak governance, corruption, poor public services, and a lack of accountability to establish operational bases and recruit members. As Haidara (2023) observed, the widespread corruption and patrimonial management of states have contributed to widening the gulf between the political elites and their constituents.

In fragile states, these conditions create a security vacuum, allowing groups like Boko Haram and ISIS to thrive. They leverage local grievances, economic hardships, and the absence of effective state control to gain support and expand their influence. For instance, in the Sahel, terrorist groups have capitalised on the state's inability to provide security and basic services, which has facilitated their spread and increased violence in the region (Yacoubian, 2023).

Coups and terror often take two general forms: military coups and constitutional coups (Mahmoud & Taifouri, 2024). Constitutional coups involve changing the regime or government in an unconstitutional manner, often bypassing the popular will and approval of democratic institutions (Marinov & Goemans, 2013). Military coups represent a familiar pattern of change in Africa. Although this phenomenon declined at the beginning of the 21st century, it has seen a resurgence in the last three years.

Ethnic and religious conflicts, exacerbated by the influx of external weapons, often account for the Sahel region's heightened vulnerability to terrorism, in addition to the two broad types of coups mentioned above. However, deeper issues also play a critical role. Environmental stressors such as weather extremes, erratic growing cycles, desertification, and the reduction of arable land contribute significantly to the perception of dwindling economic opportunities, particularly among the youth (Boukhars & Pilgrim, 2023). Instead of leveraging their authority to mediate disputes and foster intercommunal harmony, many political leaders, often using social media, exploit these tensions for personal political gain. Six coup attempts in the region since 2021 demonstrate this exploitation. These compounded stressors create fertile ground for violent extremists, including numerous deadly terrorist groups, to consolidate power and attract followers. Notably, the area where Niger and Burkina Faso converge is especially affected, with a notable presence of IS affiliates and Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam

wal-Muslimeen, alongside other violent groups engaged in crime and violence, many of which are not officially aligned with international terrorist organisations.

Historically, coups have occurred more frequently in West Africa and the Sahel than in other regions, a reflection of deep-seated political and social instability (IEP, 2024b). The Sahel region has become the global epicentre of terrorism, with 43% of terrorism-related deaths occurring there in 2023, up from 1% in 2007 (IEP, 2024a). Two states, Mali and Burkina Faso, account for 73% of these deaths, mainly due to attacks by jihadist groups JNIM and ISSP. Weak governance, ethnic tensions, ecological insecurity, and other systemic issues exacerbate the violence (IEP, 2024a). Furthermore, the spread of violence beyond the Sahel to countries like Togo and Benin highlights the growing regional instability. In its 'Global Terrorism Index 2024: Measuring the Impact of Terrorism', IEP (2024a: 3) wrote:

> "The epicentre of terrorism has now conclusively shifted out of the Middle East and into the Central Sahel region of sub-Saharan Africa. There were just under four thousand deaths from terrorism in the Sahel in 2023, or 47 per cent of the total. The increase in terrorism in the Sahel over the past 15 years has been dramatic, with deaths rising 2,860 per cent, and incidents rising 1,266 per cent over this period. Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger account for most of the terrorism deaths in the region. All three face uncertain futures, having suffered from coups, weak governance, and fragile relations with neighbouring countries, exemplified by their recent withdrawal from ECOWAS."

The crises in the Sahel have displaced over 4 million people, with the potential to add millions more to the already high numbers of global human migration (Abdel-Latif and El-Gamal, 2024; Mahmoud & Taifouri, 2024). Africa's growing population and increasing climate instability exacerbate this problem. Over the last three years alone, this area has witnessed a wave of coups d'état in seven countries, including Mali, Burkina Faso, Guinea, Niger, and Gabon, with five military coups succeeding. Allegations of corruption, economic mismanagement, and the ruling regimes' failures to confront armed separatist and jihadi movements often drive these coups, resulting in a pervasive sense of insecurity and dissatisfaction among the populace (Mahmoud & Taifouri, 2024).

The crisis in the Sahel region has escalated since 2012, with a proliferation of armed conflicts and control by groups such as al-Qaeda's Sahelian offshoot JNIM and the ISSP. The security situation in the Sahel region is deteriorating, with 2023 being the most violent year on record and 2024 expected to be no different (ACLED, 2023). Political violence in Burkina Faso resulted in a twofold increase in fatalities, making it the second highest in West Africa, surpassed only by Nigeria. Conflicts in the central Sahel caused a 38% increase in mortality, while civilian deaths increased by more than 18%. ACLED (2023) classifies severely affected Mali and Burkina Faso as regions with a high incidence of violence. The current pattern of elevated violence is expected to continue due to the

escalation of counter-insurgency measures in response to the insurgents' progressively belligerent strategies.

In Mali, dissatisfaction with the government peaked in August 2020 when Colonel Assimi Goïta led a coup that ousted President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita. Armed groups and Islamic extremists accused the government of failing to protect civilians from attacks, and they perceived it as corrupt and incompetent (Dion & Sany, 2021). The initial public support for the coup reflected widespread frustration with the status quo. For example, the extensive corruption and patronage-based management in Niger and Burkina Faso have created a significant divide between political elites and their constituents. The intense security crises in Niger and Burkina Faso have further undermined already ineffective institutions and destroyed many people's livelihoods. Amidst this chaos, the military's structured, disciplined, and hierarchical nature appeals to the population, who hope these qualities will translate into better societal and political management. Looking back, however, this expectation often remains unfulfilled.

Similarly, Niger experienced political turmoil following a contentious presidential election in March 2021. Despite the regularity of elections in Africa, their transparency has been a source of contention. For example, Mahamane Ousmane, the incumbent, contested Mohamed Bazoum's victory with 55.75% of the vote and claimed a victory with 50.30%. The resulting tensions culminated in an attempted coup just before Bazoum's inauguration (France 24, 2021a; The Defence Post, 2021). Ongoing security challenges, including violent clashes with jihadist groups, exacerbated this political instability, underscoring the fragile nature of Niger's governance and its susceptibility to military intervention.

The assassination of long-time leader President Idriss Deby in April 2021 dramatically altered Chad's political landscape. Many viewed the installation of his son, General Mahamat Idriss Deby, as interim president as a military coup (Debos, 2021; Brachet, 2022). This transition sparked protests and highlighted the state's militarised nature. Persistent instability has been a result of this external influence and internal power struggles. Foreign powers, particularly France, have played devastating roles in Chad's political stability, contributing to the failure of establishing long-term governance solutions (Eizenga, 2018; Chafer, 2019; McDonald, 2024).

Dissatisfaction with democracy has been a crucial factor in the proliferation of coups and terrorism in the Sahel region and elsewhere on the African continent. Various groups, including local communities, armed factions, and disaffected youth, often harness this discontent to justify and support actions that undermine democratic governance. To demonstrate this, IS Sahel created a pseudo-state in rural areas from Gao to Dori and N'Tillit to the Tahoua border. The group is expanding its influence through large-scale violence in regions with weak opposition, taking advantage of the chaotic conflict environment where numerous armed groups have failed to contain them (Nsaibia, 2023a). The Afrobarometer surveys highlight a significant decline in satisfaction with democracy across Africa, indicating a broader crisis of confidence in

democratic institutions and processes (Afrobarometer, 2023; German Institute for Global and Area Studies, GIGA, 2023).

This disillusionment creates fertile ground for coups and the rise of terrorist activities. According to the Afrobarometer (2023), satisfaction with democracy has significantly declined in many African countries, with Niger and Burkina Faso being no exception to this. The dissatisfaction stems from the perception that democratic governments fail to meet popular expectations and address socio-economic issues effectively. This failure arguably leads to a decline in public confidence in democratic governance and an increased attraction to military rule and intervention.

Local communities, especially those in marginalised and underdeveloped regions, as well as youth, often view military coups as potential solutions to their grievances. In Burkina Faso, where the government controls only 6% of the territory, communities have faced persistent security threats from rebel and terrorist groups, such as Al-Qaeda and ISIL (Al Jazeera, 2022). The state's inability to provide security and basic services fosters support for military interventions, perceived as capable of restoring order and stability. Armed groups also exploit dissatisfaction with democratic governance to justify their actions and garner support. In Niger and Burkina Faso, numerous groups, like JNIM and the Islamic State Sahel Province (ISSP), capitalise on local grievances, ethnic tensions, economic hardships, and government corruption (International Crisis Group, ICG, 2022). They present themselves as alternative providers of security and justice, appealing to communities disillusioned with the state.

Coup leaders have, in some cases, presented their actions to restore democracy, appealing to a desire for political stability and reform (Akinola & Makombe, 2024). However, evidence suggests that military regimes in Africa typically perform worse than their civilian counterparts. Akinola (2021) notes that military-led governments frequently fail to deliver on promises of democratic governance and economic development. Historical and contemporary examples illustrate that these regimes exacerbate existing problems, such as corruption, economic instability, and human rights abuses, rather than resolving them (Ojo, 2020). The disillusionment among populations, fuelled by both the failures of elected governments and the subsequent coups, leaves societies vulnerable to further instability and exploitation (Rizk, 2019). The cycle of failed governance and military intervention undermines trust in democratic processes, creating a pervasive sense of disenfranchisement among citizens and undermining efforts to achieve sustainable democratic development (Lyammouri, 2021).

The exported democracy model to Africa lacks essential attributes necessary for effective governance. This model fails to account for the complex socio-political realities of African societies, where the interplay of identity, values, and goals plays a critical role in shaping political engagement (Nnaji, 2021). Rulers and political entrepreneurs frequently thwart African citizens' efforts to engage in meaningful dialogue about their relationship with the state, prioritising personal gain over collective welfare (Kofi, 2020). These leaders often manipulate political spaces and privatise public goods, further entrenching their power and weakening democratic practices (Wang, 2018).

Additionally, the militarisation of African societies has led to the paradoxical celebration of a military resurgence in politics, particularly in West Africa and the Sahel (Gordon, 2023). Despite evidence that such interventions exacerbate instability and hinder democratic progress, this phenomenon reflects a troubling trend where people see military intervention as a solution to political dysfunction (Amoako, 2021).

Economic mismanagement and corruption have also been significant factors in the coups across the Sahel. Colonel Mamady Doumbouya ousted President Alpha Condé in Guinea in September 2021, following Condé's attempts to amend the constitution for a third term (Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2021; Keulder, 2021). Widespread public discontent over economic mismanagement and poor service delivery fuels the coup. The international community's reaction included condemnation and sanctions from ECOWAS, reflecting the broader regional implications of such political upheavals.

International responses to these coups have been mixed, reflecting the complexities of regional and international interests. While France and the US generally support elected governments for reasons beyond just promoting democracy, other international players like Russia have exploited these opportunities to enhance their influence by supporting emergent regimes (Abdel-Latif and El-Gamal, 2024). This geopolitical competition adds another layer of complexity to the Sahel's political dynamics, hindering efforts to establish lasting stability.

Extreme violence in the Sahel has increased displacement and migration, putting significant pressure on northern countries and Europe (CFR, 2023). The region faces unprecedented levels of armed violence, food insecurity, and lack of basic services, affecting around 25 million people, particularly in Burkina Faso, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, and Chad (ECHO, 2023). Weak statehood and stalled development have exacerbated the crisis, causing mass migration and competition for land amid population growth and climate change (Bøås, 2019). Attacks on aid organisations hinder humanitarian efforts, making the region highly dangerous for relief operations (Ferraro, 2021).

Political dissatisfaction, economic mismanagement, corruption, and security challenges primarily drive the resurgence of coups in the Sahel region. These coups highlight the fragility of state institutions and the complex interplay of domestic and international influences. Addressing these underlying issues is crucial for establishing stable and effective governance in the Sahel, a task that requires coordinated efforts from both regional actors and the international community.

Niger

On July 26, President Mohamed Bazoum was apprehended, and the government of Niger was overthrown. A coup was orchestrated by military officers in January 1996 with the intention of removing President Mahamane Ousmane and Prime Minister Hama Amadou. The assassination of former President Ibrahim Baré Maïnassara by dissident soldiers at Niamey airport in April 1999 paved the way for the third rebellion

in Niger's history. In 2010, a group of military commanders, led by Nigerian Lieutenant General Salou Djibo, captured President Lieutenant Colonel Mamadou Tandja and his ministers during a fierce gun battle. They were operating under the banner of the 'Supreme Council for the Restoration of Democracy (CSDR)'. The multifaceted causes of coups and armed violence in Niger include political instability, economic challenges, and militant insurgencies.

Niger's history of military coups, including the most recent in July 2023, reflects deep-seated issues of governance and power struggles within the military and political elites. Economic challenges, such as widespread poverty and unemployment, exacerbate political instability by fuelling public discontent and undermining the legitimacy of state institutions. Jihadist groups, namely ISSP and Boko Haram, have made Niger a focal point due to its strategic position in the Sahel and its porous borders (Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2023). These groups exploit local grievances and weak state control to establish their presence and conduct operations, thereby exacerbating internal conflicts (ICG, 2021).

The manifestation of armed violence in Niger is stark, with frequent attacks on civilians, government forces, and infrastructure. In 2021, ISSP was responsible for over 560 reported civilian deaths, highlighting the group's brutal tactics and significant impact on the population (ACLED, 2021). These attacks have been known to result in mass killings, kidnappings, and destruction of property, contributing to a climate of fear and instability. The violence has led to the formation of self-defence militias in regions like Tillaberi and Tahoua, which, while intended to protect communities, often escalate conflicts. These militias engage in retaliatory actions against militants and suspected collaborators, leading to cycles of violence and retribution that destabilise local communities (ICG, 2021).

Colonial history and subsequent post-independence governance challenges form the foundation of Niger's instability. Niger's first coup occurred in 1974 (the 25th coup in Africa), when Lieutenant Colonel Seyni Kountché led his military forces in bringing down President Hamani Diori's régime, setting a precedent for military intervention in politics (Higgott & Fuglestad, 2008). This pattern of coups reflects deep-seated governance issues, including corruption, a lack of political inclusiveness, and ineffective state institutions. Economic hardships, exacerbated by climate change and limited state capacity to provide services, have further fuelled public discontent. The government's inability to effectively control its territory has allowed militant groups to establish strongholds, particularly in border areas where state presence is weak and local grievances are high (Charbonneau, 2017).

The trends in Niger indicate a continuation of these challenges, with militant groups expanding their reach and influence. The government's dependence on international military assistance, particularly from France and the US, has presented both advantages and disadvantages. While this support offers essential resources and training to counter insurgencies, it also incites local opposition to foreign presence, viewed as a form of neo-colonial interference. Additionally, the political landscape remains volatile post-

coup, with the junta focusing on consolidating power rather than addressing underlying issues of governance and security. This volatility undermines efforts to stabilise the country and address the root causes of conflict (Hoffman, 2020).

Niger's situation exemplifies the complex interplay between local grievances, regional dynamics, and global geopolitics in the Sahel. Effective solutions require a multifaceted approach, addressing not only immediate security concerns but also long-term development and governance reforms. Strengthening state institutions, promoting inclusive governance, and addressing economic disparities are crucial steps toward sustainable peace. International actors must balance security assistance with development aid and diplomatic engagement to help Niger build a more stable and prosperous future (Charbonneau, 2017).

Burkina Faso

Both internal political instability and external militant threats are the root causes of coups and armed violence in Burkina Faso. The country has experienced multiple coups since its independence, the latest being in January 2022. These coups are often responses to perceived failures in governance, corruption, and the inability to address security threats posed by militant groups such as JNIM and the ISSP. These groups exploit weak state structures and local grievances to expand their influence and conduct violent operations (Bøås & Strazzari, 2020).

Armed violence in Burkina Faso has manifested in widespread attacks on civilians, security forces, and state infrastructure. In 2021, JNIM-affiliated militants perpetrated the deadliest attack on civilians recorded in the country's history, killing approximately 160 people in Solhan (ICG, 2020; Nsaibia & Duhamel, 2021). Such incidents illustrate the militants' strategic objectives: to destabilise the government, control territories, and exploit local ethnic and communal tensions. These attacks not only cause immediate harm but also erode trust in the government's ability to protect its citizens, thereby fuelling cycles of violence and insecurity (Hoffman, 2020).

Burkina Faso's background is characterised by turbulent political history and socioeconomic challenges. Since gaining independence from France in 1960, the country has struggled with political instability, marked by frequent changes in government through coups and uprisings (Thurston, 2021). The economic situation, characterised by poverty and underdevelopment, has further compounded these difficulties. High unemployment, a lack of basic services, and limited economic opportunities create fertile grounds for militant recruitment and radicalisation. This socio-economic fragility undermines state legitimacy and exacerbates existing tensions within communities (Charbonneau, 2017; Thurston, 2021).

Current trends in Burkina Faso show a worsening security situation despite efforts by the government and international partners to counteract militant activities. The country's reliance on volunteer defence militias like the Volunteers for the Defence of the Homeland (VDP) has had mixed results. While these militias provide additional security resources, they often lead to further violence and human rights abuses. Their

actions can exacerbate ethnic and communal tensions, as they sometimes operate with little oversight and engage in retaliatory attacks against perceived enemies. Additionally, the coup in January 2022 has created a power vacuum, complicating the coordination of counter-insurgency efforts and undermining public trust in the government (ICG, 2020).

The ongoing instability in Burkina Faso highlights the need for comprehensive strategies that address both security and governance challenges. Military interventions are necessary to contain immediate threats, but long-term solutions require addressing root causes such as poverty, governance deficiencies, and social fragmentation. Strengthening state institutions, promoting inclusive political processes, and investing in economic development are crucial for sustainable peace. International support tailored to bolster local capacities and promote sustainable development is essential. The international community must engage with Burkina Faso in a balanced manner, providing security assistance while also supporting long-term development and governance reforms to stabilise the country and the broader Sahel region (Charbonneau, 2017; Haidara, 2023).

Terrorism and exploitation of ungoverned spaces in the Sahel

Across the Sahel region, terrorist groups have exploited ungoverned spaces to establish strongholds and expand their operations. This region, defined by its porous borders and weak governance, has become a breeding ground for various extremist organisations, including affiliates of the Islamic State and al-Qaeda. ISSP has taken advantage of conflicts and animosities between ethnic groups, civilian populations, and national states in the Mali-Niger-Burkina Faso borderlands. These jihadists have leveraged the lack of effective state control in the region to implicate themselves in local politics, using existing tensions to their advantage (Thurston, 2021).

Sahelian militant groups have also used political and socio-economic factors, as well as the ideological appeal of their religious messaging, to expand their influence. The broader global ideological current of Islamic militancy has provided these groups with a framework to rally support and mobilise followers, particularly in areas where state capacity has weakened and local conflicts have escalated. In central Mali, for instance, the breakdown of the rural socio-economic order and a crisis of governance have created an environment ripe for the growth of militancy and banditry. Communal conflicts, cross-border migration, and the absence of effective state security and justice systems have all contributed to the proliferation of armed groups in the region (Nsaibia & Duhamel, 2021; Ratiu, 2022; Nsaibia, 2023b).

A confluence of factors that have created an enabling environment for terrorist groups to thrive is responsible for the rise of violent extremism in the Sahel, particularly in Burkina Faso and Niger. Burkina Faso and Niger have long struggled with issues of governance, capacity, and legitimacy, leaving vast swaths of their territory effectively ungoverned. This has allowed extremist groups to establish a presence and exert control

over local populations by offering alternative governance structures and basic services that the state fails to provide (Bøås & Strazzari, 2020; Boukhars & Pilgrim, 2023).

Violence in the Sahel has evolved from opportunistic criminal activities to more ideologically driven extremism, as terrorist groups exploit local grievances and the lack of state presence. These groups recruit people from marginalised communities and use unregulated spaces to plan and execute their operations. Security forces in Niger and Burkina Faso either hinder or refuse to provide adequate protection to vulnerable communities, resulting in a breakdown of trust between citizens and the state. This security and power vacuum allows extremist groups to fill the gap and present themselves as an alternative source of 'justice' and order (Devlin-Foltz, 2010; Nsaibia & Duhamel, 2021).

Terrorist organisations have leveraged local grievances, such as marginalisation, economic deprivation, and ethnic tensions, to gain the support of disaffected communities (in the case of Mali, see Besenyő & Romaniuk, 2024). By positioning themselves as champions of the downtrodden, these groups have expanded their recruiting and mobilisation efforts. For instance, violent extremist organisations have taken advantage of the marginalisation of nomadic communities in the region to draw them into their fold by offering them a sense of belonging and purpose (Ratiu, 2022). JNIM, ISSP, ISWAP, and Boko Haram exploiting socio-political frustrations of pastoralists in Nigeria, where many turned towards criminality and fostered relations with extremist groups (see Ejiofor, 2022). Activities championed by these groups are vastly more lucrative than any stable economic venture, require no long-term investment, and thrive in the absence of state control. As a result, there has been little economic motivation to establish a monopoly on violence. For years, the governments of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger have relied on local strongmen as proxies, while corrupt political figures have collaborated with organised crime networks to secure a share of illicit profits. The spread of weapons and the militarisation of smuggling operations stemmed from the rise of armed banditry in what was essentially a lawless environment. In this context, jihadist groups not only found opportunities to retreat and generate revenue but also encountered local communities with little incentive to cooperate with governments they had never seen in a favourable light.

In both fragile states discussed, the governments' inability to control large areas of territory provides terrorist groups with ungoverned spaces to establish safe havens (Cutter, 2003; Terlinden & Debiel, 2003). These areas allow groups such as JNIM and ISSP to plan and execute attacks, train recruits, and store weapons without significant interference from state forces. In Mali, for example, the northern regions of Kidal, Gao, and Timbuktu have been under the control of various militant groups since the 2012 Tuareg rebellion. Despite international intervention, these areas remain outside the effective control of the Malian government, allowing terrorist groups to operate freely (ACLED, 2024).

Weak or non-existent regulation of economic activities often characterises the political economy in fragile states, allowing terrorist groups to engage in and profit from

illicit economies. These activities include drug trafficking, smuggling, and illegal mining, providing significant financial resources to sustain their operations. In Burkina Faso, jihadist groups have taken control of artisanal gold mines in the Sahel region. A report by the United Nations (UN) estimated that these groups generate millions of dollars annually from illegal gold mining operations, which they use to fund their activities across the region (UN, 2022).

The presence of terrorist groups in fragile states often disrupts humanitarian efforts, exacerbating the suffering of local populations and further weakening state legitimacy. This creates a cycle where increased humanitarian needs provide additional recruitment opportunities for terrorist organisations. In Mali, for instance, attacks on humanitarian convoys and aid workers have increased significantly. The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) reported over 50 incidents of targeted aid workers in 2023 alone. These disruptions hinder aid delivery and amplify the local population's grievances against the state (OCHA, 2023).

Fragile states with weak governance and poor service delivery create conditions of disillusionment and frustration among the population, particularly youth. Terrorist organisations capitalise on these circumstances by providing prospective recruits with financial incentives, ideological indoctrination, and a sense of purpose. In Burkina Faso, the collapse of state authority in the northern regions has led to a surge in recruitment by jihadist groups. According to a 2023 report from the ICG, these groups have increasingly targeted disenfranchised young men, capitalising on local grievances and the absence of state institutions to provide alternative livelihoods.

Longstanding tensions between ethnic and social groups in the Sahel, exacerbated by resource scarcity and economic marginalisation, have provided fertile ground for extremist recruitment and mobilisation (see Lyammouri, 2019). The porosity of borders and the ability of extremist groups to exploit regional mobility and networks have allowed them to spread their influence across the Sahel. Reversing this spiral of insecurity and violence will require a multifaceted approach that addresses the underlying governance, socio-economic, and environmental challenges in the region. Strengthening the capacity of state institutions to provide security and justice while fostering community-centred, inclusive responses will be crucial to degrading the influence of violent extremist groups (Ratiu, 2022).

Coup leaders often present their actions as a means to restore order, appealing to a desire for political stability and reform (Akinola and Makombe, 2024). However, evidence suggests that military regimes in Africa typically perform worse than their civilian counterparts. Akinola & Makombe (2024) note that military-led governments frequently fail to deliver on promises of democratic governance and economic development. Historical and contemporary examples illustrate that these regimes often exacerbate existing problems, such as corruption, economic instability, and human rights abuses, rather than resolving them (Haidara, 2024). The disillusionment among populations, fuelled by both the failures of elected governments and the subsequent coups, leaves societies vulnerable to further instability and exploitation.

Conclusion

The connection between ungoverned spaces, failed states, and terrorism is significant and multifaceted. Counter-terrorism, stabilisation, reconstruction, and peacebuilding efforts intricately link ungoverned spaces, often resulting from failed states (Issaev et al., 2022). The inability of a state to provide for its citizens leads to destabilisation, which is a key factor in the creation of a failed state (Terlinden & Debiel, 2003). A weak or collapsed state relinquishes its exclusive right to employ force, thereby losing its ability to govern its territory and offer security, protection, and other essential necessities to its citizens. History shows that failed and weak states provide an ideal environment for the establishment of VNSAs, which often assume authority in places (Ali, 2020).

The emergence of new types of armed conflicts conducted in the name of religious or ethnic identities has increased challenges to politics, as guerrillas, warlords, and terrorists do not respect borders or peace accords (Holtz, 2002). Political instability resulting from coups can weaken state institutions, creating power vacuums. Equally, fragile states struggle with governance, often unable to provide basic services, leading to social and economic unrest. In turn, areas where the government has little or no control become breeding grounds for criminal and terrorist activities. Terrorist organisations take advantage of these conditions, exploiting ungoverned spaces and the chaos caused by state fragility and coups to recruit, train, and expand their influence.

The Sahel region's complex interplay of terrorism, state fragility, and military coups has established a self-reinforcing cycle of instability that has produced considerable threats to regional security. The emergence of juntas in Niger and Burkina Faso has exacerbated state fragility by undermining governance structures and creating power vacuums. These conditions have created an ideal environment for terrorist organisations to exploit ungoverned spaces, resulting in an increase in violence, displacement, and socio-economic disruption. The interconnection of coups, weak state institutions, and terrorism underscores the need for more innovative strategies that address the root causes of instability and immediate security concerns.

To disrupt the cycle of violence and foster enduring peace in the Sahel, deeper research of these issues in each country and in the region as a whole is needed to help inform the formulation and implementation of effective interventions that prioritise strengthening state institutions, improving governance, and identifying the underlying causes of fragility.

Conflict of Interest

Notes on Contributors

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