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Introduction to the issue

Coups and Terror in the Sahel:

Terrorist Groups' Exploitation of State Fragility and Ungoverned Spaces

László Csicsmann and Scott N. Romaniuk

Since 1950, Africa has experienced more successful and unsuccessful coups than any other continent. Since 2020, there have been nine successful coups in West and Central Africa. A failed coup attempt in Sierra Leone in November 2023 led to the capture of thirteen military commanders, and a similar attempt in Guinea-Bissau in December resulted in gunfire between the insurgents and security forces. Senegal, known for its stability and peaceful changes of power through democratic and electoral mechanisms, faced concerns about these processes at the beginning of 2024. Coups are on the rise in West and Central Africa due to increased state fragility, as well as other factors that have generated a mutually reinforcing dynamic between terrorism and destabilisation and ungoverned spaces throughout the Sahel (Mahmoud & Taifouri, 2023; Taruvinga, 2023).

While each coup has its own unique characteristics, they all share some common elements. To varying degrees, all Sahelian countries have faced the burdens and challenges of colonialism and foreign intervention, with governments either unable or unwilling to adequately protect and advance the welfare of their citizens, an under-represented youth demographic, corruption, jihadist ideologies or activities, and the failure of international stability efforts. Extremist violence is on the rise in the Sahel, which some experts have dubbed the 'new battleground for terrorism', accounting for 43% of worldwide terrorist fatalities by 2023. Burkina Faso and Mali account for 52% of total terrorist deaths in Africa (Africa Defense Forum, ADF, 2023).

The coups and the withdrawal of French and US military forces from the Sahel region have created power vacuums that state actors (Russia, China) and non-state entities (jihadist groups active in the region) may fill. The absence of a stable government, ungoverned spaces, and actors seeking to fill these power vacuums have already had a significant negative impact on nearby regions and states. 1) Migration pressure from Sahel countries is mounting on the European Union (EU); 2) Jihadist groups affiliated with Al-Qaeda or the Islamic State have turned the Sahel region into their new stronghold; 3) Humanitarian repercussions, especially hunger and health concerns, have become more prevalent; and 4) The emergence of non-traditional security challenges has exacerbated existing conditions (Ray, 2024).

This thematic issue of JCEEAS, titled 'Coups and Terror in the Sahel: Terrorist Groups' Exploitation of Fragile States and Ungoverned Spaces', features seven articles that adopt diverse methodological and theoretical approaches. The issue also includes reviews of four recently published books.

The first article in the issue, by Péter Rada and Alex Pongrácz, on state building under the Liberal World Order (LWO), highlights the notion that universal adherence to liberal rules can promote global security. After 9/11, particularly after the 2003 invasion of Iraq, state building transitioned from humanitarian operations to a tactic of great power politics. The essay conceptualises state building under LWO in light of contemporary geopolitical crises. Their study critiques the implementation of nation building, suggesting that failures stem from American-led efforts rather than the underlying theory itself. They propose a set of interrelated Liberal World Order presumptions, including state building to enforce universal principles.

The study focuses on the Westphalian system, which established state sovereignty as a fundamental concept of international relations, allowing states to determine their internal political institutions without external interference. The authors demonstrate that, despite its idealistic basis, the system has experienced challenges, including selective adherence to non-intervention rules by powerful states. Rada and Pongrácz critique the concept of absolute sovereignty, suggesting that contemporary problems need a rethinking of state sovereignty and intervention norms.

Most notably, the authors study violent shifts, coups, and instability in Africa by linking intervention, Westphalia, and the Ukraine war to the continent and state building. The authors explain how colonial legacies have hampered state building on the continent, causing internal tensions and national identity issues. The paper advocates for context-specific approaches that build on indigenous governance models rather than externally imposed solutions. They argue that state building is essential for the Liberal World Order, especially in unstable regions. This is especially applicable to the Sahel and elsewhere in Africa. The diversity of state building outcomes in Africa illustrates the difficulties and the need to adapt to local situations.

The second article by Edson Ziso and Antonetta Hamandishe uses a qualitative descriptive approach to look into the link between terrorism, state fragility, and coups. It focuses on Niger and Burkina Faso and shows how recent coup attempts have helped terrorist activities spread by putting them in the historical context of political instability in the region. As the authors demonstrate, Burkina Faso and Niger have long struggled with challenges of governance, capacity, and legitimacy, resulting in enormous ungoverned space and a convergence of variables that have created an atmosphere conducive to the growth of terrorist groups.

In the third article, 'Military regimes in the Sahel as recruitment sergeants for rebel governance', Samuel Edet, Efefiong Edet, and Nwankwo Guzorochi Confidence discuss the rise of military regimes in Mali and Burkina Faso in response to violent extremist organisation-caused security crises. Even when military governments legitimise rebel administrations by allowing violent extremist organisations to exist, violence and human insecurity continue to rise in these locations, according to

the authors. But they thrive on state fragility, not state-building, unlike other actors in the international system.

The authors examine the region's key actors and discuss how military regimes contribute to insecurity. The reliance on external parties for security, such as the Wagner Group, has resulted in human rights violations and greater instability. When assessing the impacts of military regimes, the authors contend that they jeopardise human and political security by portraying civil society as adversarial. This degradation in state-civil society relations fuels a cycle of violence and conflict, undermining efforts to develop stable administration. Military regimes, despite presenting themselves as effective alternatives to civilian administrations, have contributed to the problem by perpetuating the very risks they seek to eliminate.

The fourth article by Yasmin Arshad and Sehrish Qayyum investigates the relationship between military power and PMSCs, as well as their historical, environmental, and political consequences, set against the backdrop of state fragility and the region's security vacuums. The region's cycle revolves around the cross-currents of terrorist groups, the roles of PMSCs in current conflicts, and the interplay between the military and PMCS. Historical grievances, prevalent in numerous Sahelian countries, intensify the Sahelian government's reliance on PMSCs in the broader trend of militarisation as a response to security issues. Even though they frequently alienate local populations and governments and threaten national and regional security, PMSCs provide a crucial role or service.

They consider three cases: Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger. From a constructivist perspective, the authors consider how social norms and identities affect state PMSC usage, typically prioritising national identity over strategic benefits. Military regimes view PMSCs as crucial partners in handling security challenges; they legitimise them. The authors incorporate the legacy of colonial authority and external geopolitical interests into their analysis, which shapes the Sahel's military governance environment and leads to recurring cycles of military coups. The three case studies' recent military coups illustrate public frustration with corruption and security failings, typically resulting in populist leaders.

In the fifth article, 'A gendered analysis of the wave of coups and terrorism in the Sahel', Zainab Monisola Olaitan explores the disproportionate impact of terrorism and military coups on women in the Sahel region, a region grappling with a humanitarian crisis due to economic decline, climate change, and political instability. She advocates for gendered analysis to inform preventive measures and enhance human security and gender equality in the midst of continuing conflicts. In patriarchal countries, restricting rules makes women and girls more vulnerable to violence during conflicts. A feminist lens highlights how conflict weaponies women's bodies, increasing sexual violence and rights violations. Extremist groups often perpetrate and benefit from the exploitation of women as weapons of power and war.

Olaitan emphasises the role of foreign actors, like the Wagner Group, in African conflicts and instability, noting that coups in the Sahel region have allowed governments to conduct military

operations with fewer human rights constraints and often under the guise of societal protection. The author emphasises that women endure hardships during conflicts, yet they frequently face neglect or silence. Wartime rape has been considered both instinctual and deliberate. Soldiers may be ordered to have sex with women as vulnerable civilians as a pacification measure to instil fear and silence, or because soldiers who battle desire are permitted to indulge in sexual acts.

In the enduring Sudanese civil war, women and rape have been seen as forced 'necessities', with victims perceiving their 'compliance' in rape for scarce but essential food as a survival tactic. Traditional media rarely covers these concerns, especially in the West. Displacement increases their risk. Olaitan's article highlights the deterioration of women's rights in the Sahel region, which can be attributed to the fragility of the state, the lack of security guarantors, and the involvement of rebel groups in the conflict. The article advocates for targeted interventions to address the needs of women affected by war.

The sixth article, 'Africa's Transformation into a Global Terrorist Hub', by Ilas Touazi, asks: 'How is the hybridisation process of African jihadist threats articulated around a triptych of "narco-jihadism", "sea jihad", and "nikah jihad" ("sexual jihad")?' It explores both endogenous and exogenous factors that influence the spread of jihadists, with a focus on the hybridisation of jihadist threats.

The seventh article by Abdelhadi Baiche, titled 'The effects of strategic rivalries on non-rival neighbouring small states: Mauritania's political stability—shelter diplomacy to manage the Algeria-Morocco strategic rivalry', examines a unique case study through the lens of geopolitical competition and the terrorist threats the country faces. 2019 was an important year for Mauritania as it saw its first peaceful and constitutional transfer of power; the country has not experienced a military coup since 2009. As a result, Mauritania has been regarded as a ray of stability in the coup-prone Sahel. Due in large part to its close connections with France, which provides the country with both military and economic backing, Baiche attributes Mauritania's political stability to its strategic use of 'shelter diplomacy'.

This issue of JCEEAS will look at how these challenges intersect, with an emphasis on state fragility and so-called 'coup contagion' across the Sahel. We hope that the contents of the issue contribute meaningfully to the ongoing scholarly debate concerning the links between state fragility, coups, terrorism, and ungoverned spaces in the Sahel and elsewhere in Africa, as well as other regional settings. We believe that this issue's collection of essays will be informative for scholars and students interested in security, terrorism, and other related topics.

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The relevance of state-building in the 2020s and the case of Africa[1]

Péter Rada[2], Alex Pongrácz[3]

Abstract:

The study examines the relevance of state-building in the 2020s within the framework of International Relations (IR) theories, with a focus on the Liberal World Order (LWO). Rooted in liberal ideology, the theory of state-building asserts that adherence to universally accepted norms and regulations by sovereign states best achieves global security. We explore the concept of 'offensive liberalism', emphasising the proactive role of stable states in enforcing these norms in regions where state capacity is lacking. The paper revisits the literature on state-building and the international system, noting a decline in scholarly focus over the past fifteen years. However, contemporary conflicts such as the war in Ukraine have brought state-building back to the forefront of global political discourse. The study underscores the importance of state-building in maintaining the stability and security of the LWO and emphasises the need for comprehensive reconstruction efforts in war-torn regions. It argues for the continued relevance of state-building in maintaining the LWO, particularly in regions facing instability. It calls for flexible, context-aware strategies that prioritise local engagement and regional cooperation to address Africa's unique socio-political landscape's challenges and opportunities.

Keywords:
Africa; instability; IR theories; Liberal World Order (LWO); state-building.

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Introduction

State-building literature has roots in the belief that the world is universally safe for everyone if all countries follow the same liberal rules. Similar principles, reinforced and expanded globally after the end of the Cold War, form the basis of these rules. The rise of neoconservatives to prominence in the George W. Bush administration further heightened the international community's sense of responsibility to actively support the non-functional actors of the Liberal World Order (LWO). In the 1990s, this 'liberal offensive'[4] attitude was reflected in the principles and practices of the humanitarian interventions.

However, following the events in Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003, state-building also emerged as a practical tool in the hands of major powers. Particularly, Washington's foreign policy prioritised the previously overlooked field of post-conflict reconstruction after the 2003 invasion of Iraq (Fukuyama, 2004). It is therefore no coincidence—as Francis Fukuyama argued—that the most important global question in the post-9/11 era was no longer how to roll back statehood but how to rebuild state capacities. In this context, the basic assumption of 21st century state-building is that the United States (US) can establish what it considers the most perfect order in unstable regions by exporting the political system, thereby preventing the proliferation of crisis hotspots (Csicsmann, 2009: 7).

This approach originates from the theoretical belief that the LWO provides a framework for mutual development and security. Moreover, the US must not only maintain this framework but also actively expand it for its own security and the global 'common good'. In this way, along the lines of 'offensive realism' (Jervis, 1999), state-building projects can be placed within the theoretical framework of 'offensive liberalism'.[5] The building blocks of the LWO are the sovereign states, which feel responsible for this order. In case some states are not able or willing to live with this responsibility, the order's stable states can intervene to enforce the universal norms and regulations.

This paper aims to clarify the elements of a logical and conceptual system within the relevant contexts of the LWO, utilising a revised set of fundamental concepts and a shared interpretive framework for analysing the international system. This framework can also be applicable to the state-building literature. State-building, state failures, and

[4] The phrase is absent from literature, in contrast to the 'offensive realist' label. Nevertheless, Ikenberry (2020) references it within a comparable framework. It is worth mentioning that the authors of this article have reached a similar conclusion as Miller (2010), who enriched the overall critique of the neoconservative foreign policy of the Bush administration by incorporating theoretical requirements while discussing aggressive liberalism. The LWO does not inherently imply the policy of actively enforcing the principles of order. However, it is undeniably associated with state-building, as external actors may need to intervene in internal policy relations to establish order. This intervention is logically inconsistent with liberal ideals. The failure and criticism of the Bush administration's neoconservative foreign policy since 2009 have directly hindered state-building efforts.

[5] Refer to the previous footnote.

failed states were prominent topics in the scholarly literature during the late 2000s and early/mid-2010s. However, the number of published works has decreased due to the Obama-Clinton foreign policy, which explicitly avoided discussing democracy promotion and state-building to differentiate it from the Bush years. The 2008–2009 financial and economic crisis clearly showed that US foreign policy had overstretched itself, and Obama's main goal became to end the parallel operations in Afghanistan and Iraq (Zakaria, 2011).

In the 2020s, the relevance of state-building has resurfaced, particularly considering contemporary conflicts such as the war in Ukraine that necessitate comprehensive reconstruction efforts. This study revisits state-building literature and its relevance to the international system, emphasising its applicability in current geopolitical contexts, including the reconstruction of war-torn regions. Furthermore, this paper examines state-building within the African context. Post-colonial Africa presents unique challenges and opportunities for state-building, shaped by historical legacies, ethnic diversity, and socio-economic dynamics. The study looks at how these factors affect the efforts to build states in different African countries and shows how important it is to use approaches that are tailored to each situation and include local knowledge systems and indigenous ways of running governments. This perspective is crucial for understanding the diverse outcomes of state-building initiatives across the continent and for formulating strategies that can effectively address the complex realities of African states in the changing LWO.

Presumptions about the LWO

While it is evident that Biden's critics view the withdrawal from Afghanistan as premature and the unstable regional situation in the Middle East, North Africa, or the Sahel as a pressing security challenge, it is unclear what these experts would expect from the US. While US-style nation-building with a unilateral military element has not proven successful, the completion of these operations raises additional questions. Is it possible that the problem was not with the principle of nation-building itself but with its implementation? The present study does not wish to add to the list of analyses that have interpreted, evaluated, or criticised the latter based on a particular set (and many times flawed) of criteria. We set out to examine the theoretical and conceptual framework, acknowledging that the failure lies not in the theory itself, but in the US-led implementation. Such an undertaking is necessarily interdisciplinary in its theoretical perspective and eclectic in its methodology. The present paper seeks to address issues of practical relevance, but the specific character of the topic necessarily precludes it from being empirical.

According to the original idea of formal logic, a purely philosophical-theoretical study would not necessarily be deductive, nor would the formulation of hypothesis(es) necessarily be necessary. However, when formulating a central proposition to explicate, it is beneficial to begin with a compound proposition, which is composed of a series of interrelated presumptions:

- The organising force of the international system follows the logic of the LWO;
- The basis of this logic are the sovereign and equal states with a similar understanding of their responsibilities;
- According to the 'offensive liberal' concept, state-building may be necessary to enforce these universally valid norms and rules.

Why is state-building relevant again?

While the topic may not appear to address the most pressing issue in current world politics. However, when we consider state-building within the broader context of the post-war proceedings in Ukraine—which we hope will become relevant sooner rather than later—it becomes crucial to understand how the West, having provided arms to Ukraine during the war, can contribute to the reconstruction of a stable and democratic Ukraine. While it may be morally challenging to broach the subject at this juncture, Russia's stability will largely rely on the West's assistance following the war. This is because it is a mistaken belief that Russia can remain stable without assistance in state-building over the long term. During the 1990s, Russia did not receive enough Western assistance to democratise the entire structure of the state, which later was considered by neoconservative or 'liberal offensive' authors as one of the most serious missed opportunities by the US.[6] Russia will certainly not be alone, because it will have the support of China, which has been increasingly close to Russia in this respect since the outbreak of the war, even risking that the US imposes economic sanctions outright.[7]

John Ikenberry (2020, 2022) presented a convincing argument for the LWO and the place of democracies in it in several of his works, emphasising that modernity is (or has been) a challenge that all societies are struggling with. The aim has been, of course, to harness the positive effects and avoid the negative consequences. At the same time, throughout history, the faster and better performing 'liberal top learners' have tended to intervene in internal processes driven by a kind of messianic sense of mission.[8] The ideological basis of this, beyond David Hume's 'imprudent vehemence' concept, was the idea that the US should exercise the role of 'international policeman' in extreme cases.[9]

This argument was later extended to include a new one that everyone must respect human rights and that this implies an obligation to assist people 'whose poor circumstances prevent them from achieving a just and equitable political and social system' (Rawls, 2008: 18). Moreover, the US, as a genuine liberal power, tends to clothe

[6] See, for instance, the recent works of the leading neoconservative Robert Kagan (2018, 2022).
[7] See, for instance, the main topic of the meeting between Joe Biden and Ursula von Der Leyen and the meeting's joint statement on the website of the White House in which China is not mentioned explicitly but many areas are related to control the Chinese rise and political power globally. https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/03/10/joint-statement-by-president-biden-and-president-von-der-leyen-2/
[8] In the literature it is a common reference to the poem of Rudyard Kipling from 1899. 'White Man's Burden' assumes that it is the responsibility of civilised states to help and intervene in not functioning states (Rada, 2011).
[9] Theodore Roosevelt's message to Congress on December 6, 1904 (cited in Peterecz, 2016: 159).

this in a moral context, according to which the US 'interests, even if they do not directly touch upon human rights, are generally moral in nature' (Kaplan, 2018: 58). This in turn led, according to many, to the US becoming the policeman of the world under the auspices of the Pax Americana, institutionalised by the doctrine formulated by Truman in March 1947. The doctrine aimed to explicitly state that the US possessed 'universal interests and global military commitments throughout the world. …U.S. policy must support free peoples who resist armed minorities or external pressures' (Békés, 1982: 10). The assumption of this role, the often-forced democracy export, and the use of outdated strategies have also led to anomalies in the recent past.

According to Daniel L. Davis (2016), aggressive US foreign policy has failed spectacularly. US interventions, whether alone or as part of a coalition, often escalate previously unfavourable situations. State-building strategies and interventions inspired (also) by neoliberal (neoconservative) ideology failed to consider that 'the implementation of universal approaches to the imported state and liberal peace and policies dreamed up in Western centres in the country concerned, i.e., top-down, posed too many structural problems' (Illés, 2018: 66). To understand the above, it is sufficient at this point to refer to the failure of the interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq, or even to the failure of the Arab Spring and the temporary rise of the Islamic State (IS).

We can add that the earlier strategic project of state-building, which is the focus of our study and which was managed primarily by the European colonial powers, is not universally appreciated in the literature; Charles Tilly (2012: 3), for example, has argued to the extreme that 'the risk of war and state-building, which is essentially defensive blackmail backed by the benefit of legitimacy, may be the best examples of organized crime'. We could view this as somewhat ambiguous, leading us to reluctantly acknowledge that Tilly has, in a sense, accurately captured the essence.

On state-building

Returning to the problem of state-building and the scholarly state-building literature (Rada, 2011; Farkas & Pongrácz, 2018), which became known in the 1990s and dominated the 2000s, we can outline the motivation as maintaining the international system's stability, or more narrowly the framework of our own security, as opposed to the altruistic examples of foreign aid. There is a long history of political philosophy of state-building within the liberal stream, such as Immanuel Kant's (Kant, 1998) republican world order project, Michael Doyle's democratic peace system (Doyle, 1986), or even earlier Adam Smith's free trade principle (Szentes, 2002). These are all the basis of the LWO, and they are all clearly relevant in this context.

Indeed, by favouring democracy over aristocracy and free trade over autarky, the scholars who laid the groundwork for 18th-century liberal internationalism hoped to secure the prospect of ending wars (Burchill, 2005: 58). In line with the above, the Clinton Doctrine of the 1990s argues that democratic expansion, i.e., the introduction of Western political systems and institutions and an understanding of democracy in developing countries, will lead to the disappearance of armed conflicts (Csicsmann,

2009: 7). These principles, arranged in a complex theory, form the foundation of a vision of the LWO. These pillars include the belief in the mutual benefits of free trade, the universality of human rights, and the potential for peaceful coexistence between sovereign states (Kagan, 2022). Mearsheimer also points out that a 'strong state' seeking liberal hegemony seeks to mould the entire international system in its own image, which in addition to the spread of liberal democracy, includes the promotion of an open economy and the building of international institutions to address economic and security issues.

However, it is important to distinguish between self-recognition driven by self-interest and recognition forced by external forces[10]. This paper refers to the latter as the 'offensive liberal' approach. State-building motivated and supported by external actors certainly falls into this category, since it is based on the belief that the logic of rationality is universal and that the agenda-setters at the core of the LWO, such as the US or the European Union (EU), have a moral obligation to coordinate their joint efforts and to act in a pragmatically organised way so that the other actors in the order can also enjoy benefits.[11]

However, we must acknowledge that every international intervention and operation stems from a political decision. Therefore, just like in other domains, we must provide unambiguous directives for action to those engaged in the political decision-making process. We must acknowledge that politicians make decisions based on moral obligations, as demonstrated by the example of Ukraine. Consequently, it is necessary to develop a model that clearly defines why we need to address the problems of state failure. The model should consider the state-building attempts that have taken place throughout history and include the proposals that have been made so far so that we can answer the question of exactly what can be done. Furthermore, the model must be able to deal with the complexity of the problem, the different dimensions, and the conflicting forces within a single model. Both authors of this paper have discussed this model and its possibilities in their previous works (Rada, 2006, 2009, 2011; Pongrácz, 2015, 2018, 2019). This paper mainly analyses the theoretical framework that allows for the interpretation of the model, rather than the model itself. However, the model warrants attention due to the pressing need for reconstruction in Ukraine, a topic that will be the focus of future papers and research.

A significant number of state-building scholars have explored the phenomenon using the limited possibilities of some sub-disciplines of international relations, identifying, for example, democracy export or economic reconstruction with complex state-building. The term 'nation-building', which has been used by mainly US authors (see, e.g., Dobbins et al., 2007), can be misleading, however. State-building is a multi-stage process that includes creating and maintaining security, increasing social cohesion, institution building, democracy building, and the creation of a sustainable framework for economic development. The liberal logic interlinks democracy-building and state-building because

[10] Refer to the later discussion about cooperative sovereignty.
[11] John Ikenberry (2020: 32) shares similar views.

stability serves as the foundation for a belief in sustainability, and the democratic system is capable of delivering it. Of course, a plethora of literature suggests that the path to democracy is the most perilous,[12] but due to numerous positive examples, we tend to accept liberalisation as a universal formula when viewed from a Western perspective. The Western perspective is not entirely incorrect, and it is easy to understand why this way of thinking is so powerful and convincing when viewed from the perspective of Central Europe (as a member of the EU, Central Europeans are at the centre of the LWO). But it is important to remember that Central Europe and its successful democratic transitions and Euro-Atlantic integration show that a real and united internal demand for state-building is a must[13] for success.

Excursion: the nature of sovereignty in Westphalia

According to a similar logic, the existence of the sovereignty of the Westphalian state and the assumed functioning of the most important components of the order, the states, is an indispensable condition for a LWO (Ikenberry, 2020: 215). It is a well-known fact that the system constituted in 1648 after the Peace of Westphalia represented a real Copernican Revolution in that it named—and made—the state the foundation of the European order, as opposed to empire, dynasty, or religious affiliation. In an ideal-typical sense, the establishment of the concept of state sovereignty allowed each or some of the contracting parties to choose—and, in principle, free from any external intervention—their own internal political structure and—though this is not relevant to our discussion—their own religious orientation. Therefore, by aligning with the procedural clauses of the Westphalian system, 'it could be recognized as an international citizen able to maintain their own culture, politics, religion and internal policies, shielded by the international system from outside intervention' (Kissinger, 2014: 27).

Consequently, a world of states organised in differentiated political spaces replaced the former common structure of religious and secular power, the *respublica christiana*, and the organic unity of mediaeval Christian society—and its imperial, confederal, and city-state rivals.[14] From a theoretical point of view, sovereign states are, as we have seen, considered equal among themselves, irrespective of their power potential and territorial scope. All this has made it possible to link the power and sphere of action of the state to a specific territory, and the sovereignty of the Westphalian state meant that 'each state would exercise supreme, comprehensive, unqualified, and exclusive rule over its territorial jurisdiction' (Scholte, 2005: 188). Ultimately, the state became the representative of an impermeable, spatially self-enclosed territorial order—or, in Schmitt's (2006: 128–129) terminology, a spatial order—and, as an autonomous entity, it could assert a specific type of external relations with other similar representatives of the territorial order.

[12] See, for more information, the literature on turbulent democratisation, and, more broadly, the literature on democratic transitions (e.g., Mansfield et al., 2005).
[13] Mearsheimer (2018) also addresses this from a realist perspective.
[14] See, also, Spruyt (1994).

The external aspect derived from the original principle of sovereignty implies that states are not subject to any political power higher than themselves; the internal aspect of sovereignty implies that individual states are free to choose their own political systems and are not accountable to any external power for their internal affairs (Kiss, 2003: 14 and 225). (With regard to the internal aspect, the aim of the sovereign state is in fact to gain control over society; this is why the territorial state can be seen by sociological theorists such as Anthony Giddens (1987: 120) as the most significant 'containment of power', the power-container of modernity.) The Westphalian system also sought to adapt one of the fundamental basics of the system into practice: the balance of power between the powers as a guarantee of peace (Péterffy, 1942: 50).[15] In the Peace of Utrecht of 1713, the parties also later expressed their 'prior recognition by all signatories', regardless of their Catholic, Protestant, monarchist, or republican status (Koselleck, 1988: 48–49).

The ideal-typical construction of the Westphalian system, however, concealed certain illusory features from the beginning, which meant that it was possible to, de facto, break these provisions. Emer (Emmerich) de Vattel engaged in a discussion with Hugo Grotius, who argued that other states' right to intervene was justified by a clear breach of the moral law of nature and adopted a stance of non-intervention. However, at one point, he was able to overcome this conviction, recognising the legitimacy of intervention to prevent the scourge of religious civil war. When a nation asks for help from outside to escape religious terror by state means, the intervention is considered legitimate (Koselleck, 1988: 46). Later, 'organized hypocrisy' actually took hold, as powerful states only adhered to the Westphalian system's maxims when it suited their interests (Krasner, 1999).

Numerous factors have undermined and continue to undermine the autonomy resulting from the Westphalian system. According to Krasner, such factors included conventions, coercion, and imposition (Krasner, 1999: 116–117). International treaties have also laid down various exceptions to the principle of non-intervention in each other's internal affairs. Moreover, against states that mock the rule of law and are considered 'rogue' and 'pariah' states that disregard the rule of law, nowadays force can be used 'in the name of a presumed right and the reason of the strongest' (Derrida, 2005, 69, 80). One could read János Arany's poem Civilisation as a malicious expression of this organised hypocrisy, which states that '...The world has/ A more legalistic flavour:/ When the strong now do some mischief/They confer and – vote in favour' (Arany 1888: 414).

Africa and state-building

The state-building literature has significantly evolved, particularly through the lens of African experiences and perspectives. Post-colonial Africa offers a complex and

[15] Péterffy (1942: 50) also referenced Swift's scathing remark that the equilibrium of power creates a situation akin to a 'house built with a perfect balance of weight ... on which, when a sparrow stepped on it, the whole thing collapsed'.

multifaceted landscape where the interplay of historical legacies, ethnic diversity, and socio-economic challenges has shaped the discourse on state-building. Initially, state-building was closely associated with efforts to stabilise war-torn regions and establish governance structures in countries emerging from colonial rule. A top-down approach characterised these early efforts, heavily influenced by external actors and international organisations (Paris & Sisk, 2020). This logically validates the 'offensive liberal' perspective.

The need to address the arbitrary borders drawn by colonial powers, which often group disparate ethnic groups without regard for historical, cultural, or social affinities, has deeply influenced Africa's state-building narrative. This has led to persistent internal conflicts and challenges in building cohesive national identities. The literature usually stresses the importance of context-specific approaches that account for these unique historical and cultural factors (Richmond, 2020). African scholars and policymakers have increasingly advocated for indigenous state-building models that leverage traditional governance structures and local knowledge systems instead of the external solutions dictated by the 'offensive liberal' logic (Autesserre, 2021).

The evolution of state-building literature also reflects a growing recognition of the limitations of externally imposed solutions. Many African countries have experienced the shortcomings of international state-building efforts that prioritise Western models of governance and economic development. This has led to calls for more inclusive, bottom-up approaches that engage local communities and stakeholders in the state-building process (Chandler, 2020). Such approaches are seen as essential for ensuring the legitimacy and sustainability of state institutions in Africa.

Recent contributions to the state-building literature highlight the role of regional organisations, such as the African Union (AU) and sub-regional bodies, in promoting peace, security, and governance reforms across the continent. The AU's 'Agenda 2063', for instance, outlines a vision for a prosperous, integrated, and peaceful Africa, underpinned by strong, democratic states capable of delivering development and security for their citizens (AU, 2021). This regional perspective underscores the importance of African-led initiatives and the potential for regional cooperation in addressing common challenges.

Moreover, the literature has increasingly focused on the intersection of state-building and economic development in Africa. The continent's rich natural resources and young, growing population present both opportunities and challenges for state-building efforts. Effective state-building strategies view sustainable economic growth, job creation, and poverty reduction as critical components (Call, 2021). This holistic view recognises that political stability and economic prosperity are mutually reinforcing and essential to the long-term success of state-building in Africa.

The African continent presents a unique set of challenges and opportunities for state-building initiatives. Post-colonial Africa has witnessed numerous state-building efforts aimed at addressing the legacy of arbitrary borders, ethnic divisions, and weak institutions left by colonial powers. Internal conflicts, corruption, and economic

underdevelopment have exacerbated these challenges. Despite these difficulties, state-building in Africa has shown varied results, with some countries making significant strides toward stability and development while others continue to struggle.

A focus on African states

In recent years, international actors have increasingly focused on Africa as a critical region for state-building efforts. Initiatives such as the already mentioned the AU's Agenda 2063 and the United Nations' (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have emphasised the importance of building strong, resilient states capable of providing security, governance, and economic opportunities to their populations (AU, 2021; UN, 2022). Various international donors and development agencies have supported these efforts by providing financial assistance, technical expertise, and capacity-building programs to African states.

Rwanda

One notable example of state-building in Africa is the case of Rwanda, which, following the 1994 genocide, has undergone significant transformation under the leadership of President Paul Kagame. The Rwandan government's focus on reconciliation, economic development, and institutional reforms has been credited with stabilising the country and promoting rapid growth (Beswick, 2020). However, critics argue that this success has come at the expense of political freedoms and human rights, raising questions about the long-term sustainability of such a state-building model (Reyntjens, 2021).

South Sudan

Another important case is South Sudan, the world's newest country, which gained independence from Sudan in 2011. Despite initial hopes, South Sudan has faced severe challenges in its state-building journey, including ongoing conflict, political instability, and humanitarian crises (Rolandsen, 2021). The international community has played a significant role in supporting state-building efforts in South Sudan, but the complexity of the situation has highlighted the limitations and challenges of external interventions in deeply divided societies.

Somalia

The case of Somalia provides insights into the difficulties of state-building in contexts of protracted conflict and weak governance. Following the collapse of the central government in 1991, Somalia experienced decades of civil war and lawlessness. International efforts to rebuild the Somali state have faced numerous obstacles, including clan rivalries, terrorism, and corruption. Despite these challenges, recent years have seen some progress, with the establishment of a federal government and international support for security and governance reforms (Williams, 2020).

Nigeria

Nigeria, Africa's most populous country, presents another complex scenario for state-building. Despite its status as a major oil producer, Nigeria has faced challenges such as corruption, ethnic conflict, and terrorism, particularly in the form of the Boko Haram insurgency. Efforts to strengthen the Nigerian state have focused on improving governance, addressing regional inequalities, and enhancing security capabilities. However, persistent challenges highlight the need for comprehensive and context-specific state-building strategies (Akinola, 2021).

Ethiopia

Ethiopia's recent history underscores the dynamic nature of state-building in Africa. Under Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, the country has undergone significant political and economic reforms, including efforts to resolve ethnic conflicts and liberalise the economy. However, the outbreak of conflict in the Tigray region in 2020 has posed a serious threat to these reforms, demonstrating the fragility of state-building efforts in the face of internal divisions and political instability (Hassen, 2021).

Democratic Republic of Congo

Other examples include the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), where state-building efforts have been ongoing for decades amidst chronic instability and conflict. The vast mineral wealth of the DRC has both facilitated and hindered conflict and corruption, while simultaneously providing potential resources for development. International state-building efforts have focused on security sector reform, governance improvements, and economic development, but progress has been slow and uneven (Autesserre, 2021).

Liberia and Sierra Leone

In Liberia and Sierra Leone, state-building efforts have been somewhat more successful. Following brutal civil wars in the 1990s, both countries have made strides in rebuilding their institutions, with significant support from the international community. The establishment of democratic governance, efforts to promote reconciliation, and investments in development have contributed to greater stability and economic growth. However, challenges remain, particularly in terms of corruption and political accountability (Call, 2021).

Conclusion

The strengthening and building of Westphalian sovereignty, regardless of the possible anomalies in the system, is a necessary condition for the stable functioning of the world order since 'weak governance undermines the principle of sovereignty' (Fukuyama, 2004: 129). Then, functioning states will be able to collectively shape the rules of international cooperation, create international organisations, and effectively use them to pursue their own well-understood interests and goals. A basic tenet of the 'offensive liberal' orientation is that the LWO provides a framework for its democratic members

to maintain security and create economic prosperity. This logic is expansionist in any case, because within a framework of interdependence,[16] it is in the interests of the liberal core—in a form that is already rather realist—that all the world's actors should operate in a similar way. The link between the liberal literature and the literature on democratisation and democratic transitions occurs at this point (see, O'Donnell et al., 1986). The US brought the liberal order and democracy together in practice after the Second World War, and while dismantling the systemic power of the imperial logic by the 1990s,[17] designated or kept the sovereign Westphalian state as the basic unit in the international LWO.

This logic intertwined sovereign independence with the prohibition of aggression against sovereignty, establishing it as the norm within the order. However, this was not the case outside the order, and armed state-building missions accurately reflected the expansive constraints of the order. The bulwarks of the LWO reinforced and maintained by the US are the alliances of like-minded states, from which the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the EU stand out. This line of thinking describes the expansion of NATO and the EU, where Western states increasingly recognise and value the cohesive power of shared culture and roots (Huntington, 1996: 307). However, it is not surprising that countries outside the core of the order, who fundamentally disagree with it, see this very expansion as a threat to their own sovereignty. As Mearsheimer puts it, the most threatening aspect of the strategy to integrate Ukraine into the West for Moscow was NATO's eastward expansion (Mearsheimer, 2018). However, it should also be seen that the 'offensive liberal' logic does not even help refute this, while in terms of vague Putinian neo-Soviet imperial plans, NATO or EU expansion is not in fact a security threat but a limit to the level of ambition of the Putin dream.[18]

Indeed, the liberal states of the West may appear to be pragmatically trying to impose their own democratic systems at all costs on all the weaker actors of the international system, and the wild extremes of the liberal order even provide examples of how the 'West' wants to implement its grandiose 'social engineering'[19] plan based on its universal approach. However, the inherent purpose of the complex state-building attempts cited as examples was to re-establish the failing state, a state incapable of exercising its sovereignty in the Westphalian sense. The international community as a whole, as well as failed states themselves and their regions, face significant challenges due to the spillover effect. Furthermore, from a realist perspective, the latter goal is justifiable (Mearsheimer 2018: 59), even though state-building is an inherently liberal formula for maintaining order and security.

The validity of the state-centred system in Westphalia is based on full sovereignty, as understood territorially (Mearsheimer 2018: 100). When another state violates

[16] This aligns with the fundamental assumptions of the (neo)liberal movement. See, for instance, the works of Robert Keohane (Keohane et al., 1977; Keohane, 1984).
[17] Fukuyama referred to this as the victory of democracy.
[18] Kagan (2022) argues similarly in his recent article; see, also, Alexandr Dugin's (2022)—who has been Putin's main ideologue—collection of studies about Russia's Eurasian mission.
[19] Mearsheimer (2018) also notes that the focus of liberal foreign policy today is social engineering.

sovereignty or non-state actors emerge on the national and international political stage, forcing the transformation of the international institutional system, we face a serious dilemma: who should rebuild sovereignty and how? From this perspective, the intensification of the consequences of state failure is one of the most serious challenges we face. One might provocatively ask whether it is not the Westphalian system that is in crisis, since the model of statehood established in Europe and North America is rather the exception than the rule.

The rethought definition also provides a justification for external intervention. Indeed, a failing state is an international threat in and of itself because the negative consequences spread across borders to neighbouring countries, creating regional and, in the worst case, international instability. In the world of sovereign states, sovereignty protects against interference by other states, but 'cooperative sovereignty' (Marton, 2008) means that sovereignty is not necessarily and not always the property of the state. The territory of the world is the common good of the people of the world, and it is the responsibility of states to protect that common good for the people of that territory, as well as to protect the people themselves and protect the world from spill-overs. Territoriality in this sense is not a right but a duty to control sovereign territory. Statelessness arises when the state fails to exercise its control over the territory, thereby failing to serve the people. This, in turn, poses a long-term threat not only to the people residing in the territory, but also to the state itself.

Under 'cooperative sovereignty', external actors become interested in and responsible for restoring control over sovereign territory. State-building in this sense is precisely about establishing control and capacity. Despite the uncertainty and constant change in the various tasks involved in state-building, we can identify common features that characterise the process in general. There is a general recognition that alternative solutions, such as redrawing state boundaries or preserving ungoverned territories, are not viable in the current LWO.

The state, an inherently territorial entity, grants sovereignty and legitimacy to the institutional framework that governs it, typically the government, enabling it to influence any event or process occurring within its territory or the activities of its inhabitants. The literature primarily refers to state-building in the strict sense, focusing on this capability rather than on the establishment of psychological-cognitive linkages within society. It is a different question that a certain loyalty to the central institutions, i.e., the state, is essential for its sustainability. Thus, state-building encompasses the strengthening of social connections in a broader sense, as the sustainability of state-building hinges on a unified background, even if we cannot refer to it as a nation. Even 'failed states' prove/have proven to be inadequate in creating adequate institutions and practices to maintain the security of their citizens—and thus the relationship between state and society has had to endure severe breaks (Dannreauther, 2016: 92 and 102), obviating the Hobbesian sub-principle *protego ergo obligo*.

Furthermore, a crucial aspect of state-building involves creating an environment that facilitates the establishment of suitable institutions, as well as constructing or modifying

the institutional framework that forms the state itself. As previously discussed, the complex, multi-stage process of state-building builds upon military, political, economic, and social measures, with the ultimate goal of this 'project' being the emergence of a stable political, economic, and social structure (Bordás, 2015: 213).

Regarding the political aspects, however, democracy is clearly a 'Western' concept. Even if we want to define it, it is still difficult to break away from the civilisational and cultural prejudices rooted in the liberal histories of Europe and North America. Despite the populist spirit that occasionally haunts the realm of realism and the growing body of literature in political science that emphasises 'illiberal' tendencies, the concept of democracy has become synonymous with liberal ideas that are 'haunting modern societies' (Rosenvallon, 2007: 108). This is because, when discussing the propagation of democracy, it becomes evident that the goal is not merely to establish democracy, but to establish liberal democracy. However, the democratic conception is not solely compatible with pure liberalism, particularly when viewed through the lens of state theory. To bolster this argument, we urge the reader to consider the assertion that in the heyday of the welfare state, specifically in Western Europe between 1945 and 1975, Christian democracy and social democracy provided a cohesive and interconnected framework for social life (Ormos, 2009: 355). It also follows from the above statement about the establishment of liberal democracy: not all countries that claim to be democratic can be considered democratic.

The search for a connection between democracy and state-building in the literature has already been an attempt to describe preconditions and favourable conditions (see, Fukuyama, 2004). In the process of state-building, however, it is important to take into account Huntington's (1996: 311) caution that Western leaders should not aim to shape other civilisations—in the Ukrainian context and using the basic Frobenian terminology (Frobenius, 1897: 225–236)—in the image of the West but rather preserve, protect, and revitalise the unique values of Western civilisation. The success of any mission related to state-building, particularly the 're-imported state' as a 21st century attempt to export the Western-style system (Csicsmann, 2009: 15), is contingent upon the prior thorough examination of the economic, political, social, and cultural conditions and traditions of the region—in this case, Ukraine. The 'win the population strategy' (Bordás, 2015: 213), which involves gaining the support of the population, is crucial for successful state-building. This is at least a necessary, but obviously not a sufficient, condition for the Ukrainian state to potentially escape the ambiguous status of a 'buffer state'. However, even in an optimistic reading, the question of untangling the great power thread lurking in the background remains highly doubtful.

Overall, we can assert that there are no infallible formulas that promise flawless success in stabilising the war-torn Ukrainian state and guiding it towards development and growth. Moreover, given the eternal maxim that 'practice is the death of theory', unforeseeable and unpredictable factors may arise at any time from the 'ground', requiring relatively rapid adaptation to the situation and circumstances that arise. Therefore, the method of state-building, as shared by Cohen, Horvath, and Nagl (Cohen

et al., 2006: 49–53), cannot be precisely defined. However, as we have stated, this was not and could not be our goal. In the context of the events in Ukraine, however—according to the way we look at it—we have succeeded in demonstrating that state-building is still of fundamental importance in today's turbulent world.

The enduring significance of state-building within the framework of the LWO underscores its relevance in contemporary international relations. Rooted in liberal ideology, the core premise of state-building asserts that sovereign states can best achieve global stability and security by adhering to universally accepted norms and regulations. 'Offensive liberalism' encapsulates this concept, advocating for stable states to intervene to enforce these norms in regions where state capacity is lacking.

The African context presents a compelling case for examining the efficacy and challenges of state-building. Post-colonial Africa has grappled with the complex legacies of arbitrary borders, ethnic divisions, and socio-economic disparities. Despite these challenges, there have been varied outcomes in state-building efforts across the continent. The successes in Rwanda and the struggles in South Sudan illustrate the diverse trajectories of state-building initiatives. The African cases collectively highlight the importance of context-specific, inclusive, and locally informed approaches to state-building in Africa. The involvement of regional organisations, such as the AU, and the emphasis on indigenous governance models and local knowledge systems are critical for the legitimacy and sustainability of state institutions.

The study reiterates the necessity of state-building in maintaining the LWO, particularly in regions facing instability. The African context provides valuable insights into the complexities and varied outcomes of state-building initiatives. Moving forward, it is important to adopt flexible, context-aware strategies that prioritise local engagement and regional cooperation to address unique challenges and leverage the opportunities inherent in Africa's diverse sociopolitical landscape.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing or financial interests in the production and publication of this study. All disclosed information is correct to the authors' knowledge.

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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.

Keywords:
Coups; instability; juntas; state fragility; Sahel; terrorism.

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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

[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

The authors declare that they have no known competing or financial interests in the production and publication of this study. All disclosed information is correct to the authors' knowledge.

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Military regimes in the Sahel as recruitment sergeants for rebel governance[1]

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Abstract:

Recent cases of the de-democratisation of Sahelian states, such as Mali and Burkina Faso, driven by the emergence of military regimes, have been presented as responses to severe security crises occasioned by the activities of transnational violent extremist organisations. Nevertheless, the existence of such regimes has not corresponded with drastic improvements in security outcomes, as evidenced by the rapidly escalating incidents of violence and human insecurity that have particularly impacted Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. In this paper, we employ a multiple case study design to present the argument that the proliferation of these regimes accelerates the decline of these states to the status of 'state failure-hood'. Regimes that attribute legitimacy to 'rebel governance', a notion epitomised by violent extremist groups like the Sahelian branches of transnational terrorist organisations like the Islamic State (IS) and Al-Qaeda, are closely associated with this process. This 'securitisation of peace' is achieved through the implementation of techniques that exacerbate the already poor relations between the state and civil society (see Njoku, 2020). We substantiate our arguments with qualitative data gathered from a triangulation of secondary data sources, and we conduct our analyses using Thematic Content Analysis (TCA).

Keywords:
Military regimes; rebel governance; Sahel; securitisation of peace; state failure; Thematic Content Analysis (TCA).

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Introduction

Over the past decade, numerous challenges to state authority have emerged in the Sahel region, turning it into a vast geographical expression of spiraling violence. Two prominent actors, the regional franchises of the Islamic State (IS) and Al-Qaeda groups, have continuously instrumentalised violence, which has escalated both horizontally and vertically, as a mechanism for re-negotiating political orders. This has deepened the region's crisis-laden status and disrupted regional governance and social dynamics (Boas & Strazzari, 2020), ultimately affecting the credibility of states as security providers (Berlingozzi & Raineri, 2023).

These challenges have, over the past twenty-four months, served as a pretext for the resurgence of military regimes in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, with these regimes framing their existence on the promise of effective security. For instance, in 2022, two coups in Burkina Faso led to the replacement of the civilian government by the military regime of Christian Kabore, which itself was soon replaced. These coups were justified by the need to address the failures in tackling the 'security question' posed by escalating violent extremism and to restore Burkina Faso's territorial integrity and national security (Engels, 2022). In Mali, the military rulers claimed that their actions were necessary to prevent the country from sliding into 'chaos, anarchy, and insecurity' (British Broadcasting Corporation, BBC, 2020), while in Niger, the military figures responsible for the 2023 coup cited persistent insecurity as the reason for their ascent to power (Mcallister, 2023). The coexistence of these military regimes with the very threats they claim to resolve has proven problematic. These regimes operate within a security environment characterised by the horizontal and vertical expansion of transnational terrorist activities.

The paper presents the argument that the existence of military regimes itself represents a 'security risk', exacerbating the regional insecurity complex. The proliferation of these regimes accelerates the descent of these states into'state failure', as they legitimise 'rebel governance', exemplified by violent extremist organisations like the Sahelian franchises of the IS and Al-Qaeda. This occurs through the 'securitisation of peace' and the use of techniques that further strain already poor 'state-civil society' relations. Using a multiple case study approach, the paper shows that military regimes in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger have upended regional security and reduced the effectiveness of states by granting rebels greater power and relying on mercenary groups such as the Wagner Group as security supporters (see Romaniuk & Besenyő, 2023). Consequently, the relationship between the government and civilians has deteriorated. Documentary analysis of newspaper reports, academic literature, and grey literature forms the basis of the dataset. This data is triangulated and analysed using thematic content analysis.

The following sections form the structure of this paper: The first part conducts a brief review of the concept of rebel governance and its manifestations in the Sahel region. The second part briefly reviews the security context of the Sahel region, identifying the

dominant actors and emphasising the fragile state of conventional state structures, which both drive and are driven by the rampant violence that has turned the region into 'a geographical expression of mass violence'. Part three of the paper delves into the connection between this dynamic and the resurgence of military regimes in the area. In part four, the paper argues that these regimes pose risks to human and political security through actions that often portray indigenous civil society as enemies, further deteriorating relations.

Rebel governance in the Sahel

Rebel governance is a dynamic and imprecise concept, with various definitions reflecting the perspectives of those discussing it. It has been defined as 'the creation of institutions and practices by rebels that intend to shape the social, economic, and political life of civilians during civil war' (Arjona et al., 2015: 3).

Rebel governance essentially involves non-state actors, or those oppositional to the state, assuming governing functions within conflict situations. These activities go beyond war-making to include the provision of social services and the building of political institutions (Cunningham & Loyle, 2021). These entities perform these functions by engaging in rule-making, rule enforcement, and the provision of public goods and services, often in armed confrontation with states (Loyle et al., 2021). They often use judicial processes as a strategy to mobilise support by employing either concessionary or coercive mechanisms (Loyle et al., 2021). Inherent in the idea of 'rebel governance' is a competitive struggle for attributes such as 'legitimacy', 'capacity', and territorial control (Loyle et al., 2021). A considerable number of regimes have emerged in modern history, empirically testing rebel governance. According to Albert (2022), nearly 64% of rebels between 1945 and 2012 engaged in governance through the creation of governing institutions.

The existence of rebel governance in the Sahel is not a matter of conjecture but a fact, as evidenced by the successful contestation of territorial control, which the state would typically hold. In Mali, for example, significant gaps in state control have been evident in the northern part of the country, creating 'governance gaps' that insurgent jihadi groups have attempted to fill. These attempts have historically created 'states-within-states' political orders, with such groups usurping state functions by providing security and youth education (Brujin & Both, 2017). The development of networks with local elite power structures (Boas et al., 2020) and judicial institutions, designed or presented as more effective and cleaner alternatives to those of the state (Rupesinghe & Boas, 2019), illustrates efforts at institution-building. The efforts to generate and consolidate legitimacy often involve the outright elimination of state-endorsed or affiliated structures, resulting in the murder or abduction of village chiefs who collaborate with these structures (Benjaminsen & Ba, 2019).

The dynamics of rebel governance in the Sahel occur in a region that has become, over the years, a vast geographical expression of violence, driven by years of exclusivist and identitarian politics and deeply rooted poor economic indices. Escalating political

violence has plagued the region since 2012, riding on the waves of the Arab Spring. The Sahel retains its status as a region beset by severe conflicts and has become a top hub of global terrorism, accounting for at least 40% of fatalities from terrorism globally (Pham, 2024). These dynamics underscore the region's transition from an 'exotic tourist paradise' to a troubled region beset by the loss of control over national spaces, creating 'ungoverned spaces' dominated by actors intent on propagating destabilising insecurity (Boas & Strazzari, 2020: 4).

The actor complex encompasses a wide range of organisational forms, with religious violent extremist organisations emerging as the dominant actors. The Islamic State – Sahel Province (ISSP) (previously known as the Islamic State Group in the Greater Sahara, ISGS), the Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimeen (JNIM), and the Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP) have consistently created a cyclical loop of violence that has overwhelmed various sub-national and national communities across Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, establishing some semblance of state structure and functions. Collectively, these groups' actions have led to a fivefold increase in casualties since 2016, from 770 deaths in 2016 to more than 4,000 in 2019 (United Nations Office for West Africa, UNOWAS, 2020).

Both JNIM and ISSP maintain extensive control over rural and urban population centres across the three countries, exacting taxes and redistributing them (Dahiru, 2024), while also performing regulatory functions over illicit economic activities and providing 'effective security' against violent non-state actors (Ani, 2024). For instance, Human Rights Watch (HRW) estimates that violent extremist groups control more than 40% of Burkina Faso's territory as of 2022.

These groups often focus their security guarantees on threats like cattle rustling and banditry (International Crisis Group, ICG, 2019; Boas et al., 2020; Raineri, 2020). Instances of the regulatory functions assumed by these groups have also directly interfered with the social lives of inhabitants, imposing restrictions on entertainment choices and lifestyles, such as banning music, football, alcohol, smoking, prostitution, parties, and local festivals (Rupesinghe & Diall, 2019; ICG, 2020). Attempts at promoting welfare have included the distribution of material benefits, food, and money to communities in Mali and Burkina Faso (Maclean, 2019; Rupseinghe & Boas, 2019). The continued existence of these groups suggests a condition of 'shared, contested' sovereignty, wherein these groups act as co-present hubs of authority alongside state institutions, creating a political order that highlights the fragility of the Westphalian political order in the region. Boas and Strazzari (2020: 4) describe this perplexing condition as follows:

> "…we prefer to understand Sahelian states through the prism of material and immaterial resources: they may not behave like states in a Weberian sense, but they do perform certain functions of a state-like character, along with different types of patrimonial and 'Big Man' politics. Therefore, they have a remarkable hybrid character: while they may control capital cities and surrounding areas, in

> interior provinces and particularly in the most peripheral areas, the state tends to be one among several actors who compete for the role of effective, legitimate, and, ultimately, sovereign authority that people abide by."

The continued existence of this socio-political reality across affected Sahelian states has triggered the development of various national, regional, and multilateral mechanisms aimed at regulating this perpetual cycle of violence. However, while certain operations have appeared to 'freeze' some aspects of the violence, the state's inability to hold such spaces has seen the territories return to the control of violent extremist organisations (VEOs). For instance, counter-insurgency/counter-terrorism actions initiated by French forces in 2014 to stabilise Mali suffered setbacks when France withdrew its forces from Mali in 2022 due to tensions with the military government of Assimi Goita and deteriorating relations between the two governments. France's withdrawal created a power vacuum that further plunged the region into chaos and opened new doors for both non-state and state violence, in what has been referred to as 'state banditry', resulting in the emergence of new state and non-state violence perpetrators (Boutellis et al., 2023).

'The military turn in the Sahel'

In recent times, there has been a noticeable democratic backsliding in the Sahel region, characterised by the replacement of civilian elected governments with military regimes. The past few decades have witnessed an upsurge in coups. Events in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger have highlighted the coup-prone nature of the Sahelian region since 2020 (see Besenyő & Romaniuk, 2024). In 2020, military officers overthrew the then-civilian president, riding on a wave of widespread resentment stemming from electoral politics and the government's inability to manage the country's threats.

The coup leader reflected these sentiments in their argument that their ascent to power was a response to the government's inability and ineffectiveness in addressing widespread violence across the country (Fornof & Cole, 2020). The Committee for the Salvation of the People (CNSP), a group of military officers responsible for the coup, handpicked a civilian administration as a result. However, the regime that emerged from the coup also became a casualty of another coup, following a particularly acrimonious process of government formation that excluded two leading figures within the military ranks who were responsible for defence and security. Reports of tensions rationalised the August 2021 coup as a logical response to the incompetence of the civilian administration.

Burkina Faso, the next case study, followed this trend of military regimes in January 2022. Army officers, led by Lieutenant Colonel Paul-Henri Damiba, wrested power from the civilian administration, promising to address the worsening insecurity in the country (ICG, 2022a). The coup occurred after a string of deadly, high-casualty attacks on military installations and personnel in the Inata province of Burkina Faso (ICG, 2023). Captain Ibrahim Traoré, who criticised the previous regime's lack of focus on the

counter-insurgency campaign and its ineffectiveness at stemming the tide of insurgent violence, soon led another coup attempt due to dissatisfaction with the regime's performance (Al Jazeera, 2022; Maclean & Peltier, 2022; Ndiaga & Mimault, 2022).

The 2023 military rebellion in Niger took place in the context of a potentially disruptive military reorganisation that was being planned by the civilian administration of Mohammed Bazoum. This restructuring was designed to replace military leaders and remove General Abdourahmane Tchiani, the chief of the Presidential Guard (International Institute for Strategic Studies, IISS, 2023). However, in justifying their actions, members of the military cited escalating insecurity caused by numerous violent extremist organisations operating in the country (Aksar & Balima, 2023; Mcallister, 2023).

In their political reconfigurations, military regimes consistently prioritise security as the fundamental value, implying a securitisation of peace. These regimes consistently present 'security' as a dominant concern to legitimise their control and governance in the name of safeguarding against existential threats (Romaniuk & Webb, 2015). The military is presented as the ultimate source of order and stability, an insurance against state disintegration and failure, by the consistent overthrow of civilian regimes on this basis. The assertion that military seizures of power are a necessary response to maintain peace is frequently made. The security governance framework has frequently been subordinated to military control by these administrations.

The ascent of these regimes to power has often resulted in the almost inevitable centring of 'military force' as the dominant paradigm for responding to security challenges. Such dynamics arguably reflect the inherent epistemic conception of security by military regimes, which tends to reduce the concept to arms and ammunition (Nweke, 1988), as opposed to a broader approach that considers security within the context of fulfilling human needs—a more nuanced conceptualisation of security as advanced by advocates of the Copenhagen School (see Fierke, 2010; Stritzel, 2014; Buzan & Hansen, 2018; Romaniuk, 2018; Neji et al., 2024). In this instance, military regimes have typically been the origin of dynamics that often make them a 'security risk'.

Military regimes as 'security risks'

The status of military regimes as security hazards is a result of their propensity to compound insecurity and perpetuate a cycle of violence and conflict through their actions and policies. The security risks generated by such policies often arise from their attempts to consolidate power and ensure the sustainability of their rule. The regimes surveyed demonstrate these dynamics in the cases of Mali and Burkina Faso.

Case study: Mali

The Malian military regime's ontological basis as a guarantor of effective security suggests that the regime's ultimate task is the protection of the Malian state from security threats. However, the regime has increasingly outsourced its capacity to external entities,

particularly the Russian paramilitary Wagner Group (officially, PMC Wagner) (see Besenyő & Romaniuk, 2024). This group has been involved in extensive rights abuses against the civilian population and has adhered to a transactional approach to operations (Neji et al., 2024).

The repertoire of crimes committed by the group includes sexual violence and large-scale violence. In Mali, such violence has encompassed massacres, such as the Moura market massacre of 2022, wherein hundreds of civilians were killed alongside extensive sexual violence (Africa Defense Forum, ADF, 2023a). More concerningly, outsourcing security responsibility to state actors has often undermined the regime's control over national security. The lack of sensitivity to local nuances has extensively documented the grievous effects on state-civil society relations in Mali.

As a way to stop attacks and build local support against 'jihadis', the Wagner Group's operational philosophy stresses the repeated and deliberate targeting of civilians in areas seen as 'jihadi strongholds'. This makes it challenging to differentiate between civilians and combatants, which leads to random violence (Nasr, 2022: 5). The Malian military's operations have institutionalised the brutal counterterrorism approach, emblematised by the Wagner Group. This institutionalisation is evident in the adoption of 'retaliatory violence' and 'collective punishment' strategies by the Malian armed forces, which have extended the trend of destabilisation and eroded trust between the state and its citizens, fostering conditions for further violence.

Case study to: Burkina Faso

The Burkinabe military has relied heavily on organised violence tactics, often deployed indiscriminately with little regard for human rights, in response to the escalating violence in the country. The Burkinabe government has used armed civilians as part of its counter-insurgency strategy, instrumentalising 'collective patriotism' to stem the tide of escalating violence. Quidelleur (2024: 3) writes that:

> "The rise of insecurity since the mid-2010s, following the fall of President Blaise Compaoré, provided the political context in which armed mobilizations were initiated. Indeed, self-defense groups re-used old vigilant practices, mainly carrying out local policing activities. The best-known example is a group calling themselves Koglweogo, or Dozo hunters. These local initiatives take inspiration from attempts by the administration in the 2000s to establish decentralized and citizen-participation-focused public security policies: the "police de proximité", a sort of community policing. This policy aimed to integrate community participation into the operational mandate of internal security forces in managing law and order through the prevention of insecurity and crime."

These groups have become synonymous with rights violations. The ICG has documented that the increasing use of these groups, which are often poorly trained and supervised, has contributed to an ever-worsening cycle of violence through the various crimes

committed by their members. The actions of these groups overlap with and amplify existing social tensions inherent in Burkinabe society. As noted by the ICG (2023: n.p.):

> "They have not yet restored peace, however, and have even spawned new kinds of instability in many regions. Although their sheer numbers, dedication, and local knowledge have benefitted the armed forces, they have also fueled communal tensions and exposed civilians to jihadist reprisals. The VDPs—tens of thousands of civilians armed with military-grade weapons—are a double-edged sword..."

The double-edged nature of the policy is also evident in the specific problems associated with the VDP recruitment process. Selectivism, which involves the simultaneous inclusion and exclusion of certain sections of the population, has characterised the recruitment into the VDPs. This has resulted in the deliberate exclusion of certain ethnic groups, such as the Fulani and Tuareg, presumably due to their perceived ties to violent extremist groups operating in the country (ICG, 2023). This policy has facilitated the perpetuation of mass violence against certain communities. Massacres targeting ethnically Fulani residents in Nouna, Kossi Province, have manifested this violence, resulting in the deaths of over a hundred civilians (Amnesty International, 2023a).

The actions of these paramilitary groups parallel similar abuses committed by Burkinabe state forces. Since 2020, extrajudicial killings of civilians detained on suspicion of links to violent extremist groups and the perpetration of wanton violence have implicated Burkinabe state security forces. HRW has documented that between January and June 2020, Burkinabe security forces were complicit in or directly responsible for the executions of at least 81 civilians detained during counterterrorism operations, as well as the physical abuse of at least 30 Malian refugees (HRW, 2020). Members of the Burkinabe army summarily executed 220 civilians as recently as February 2024 (Turse, 2024), following an incident in Karma in April 2023 where they participated in the extrajudicial killing of over 140 people (Amnesty International, 2023b).

The paradox of the rise of military regimes in the Sahel lies in the conditions their rule has perpetuated. Attacks have not declined; instead, they have increased in lethality. Statistically, there has been a 56% increase in deaths from 2021 to 2024, with the Sahel region accounting for more fatalities than any other region in Africa. Burkina Faso alone contributes more than 48% of reported incidents of violent extremism and more than 60% of fatalities (African Centre for Strategic Studies, ACSS, 2024). Furthermore, 60% and 50% of territories in Burkina Faso and Mali, respectively, remain under the control of violent extremist organisations (ACSS, 2024).

Explaining the 'recruitment sergeant' argument

Missteps taken by various military regimes continue to correspond with a deterioration in security. In Mali, the actions of the regime, specifically its outsourcing of security provisioning to the Wagner Group, continue to fuel and sustain the insurgency. As Nasr (2022: 27) has correctly noted, 'The deployment of the Wagner Group has

strengthened and energised jihadi groups, providing them with not only a recruitment tool but a much more favourable operating environment'.

As a result, the Malian government's relentless implementation of anti-rights counter-insurgency/counter-terrorism tactics continues to act as a catalyst for civil society to mobilise resources in Mali's volatile and remote communities for insurgent, violent extremist groups. Indeed, the Fulani community, a major demographic facing punitive state-led and Wagner Group-led counterterrorism operations in Mali, has experienced surges in recruitment activity (Mehra & Demuynck, 2023). According to data, at least 50% of civilian fatalities caused by military and allied paramilitary groups in Mali and Burkina Faso in 2022 were of Fulani ethnic stock (ADF, 2023).

There has been a deliberate attempt by insurgent groups, particularly JNIM, to harness feelings of persecution as a recruitment tactic, with documented recordings of a leading figure of the group positioning it as the protector and avenger (Cissé, 2020). Such messages have drawn extensive support within the ranks of the Fulani community, resulting in the mobilisation of positive and affirmative attitudes that have bolstered the ranks of extremist groups even across the border in Mali. Observing this fact, Bisson et al. (2021: 12) write:

> "Particularly the FLM and Ansaroul Islam incorporate local grievances, as Fulani preachers concentrate on stoking Fulani herders' feelings of injustice and resentment toward the government. The FLM, also known as Katiba Macina, has played a particularly effective role in destabilizing the region using rhetoric focused on Fulani grievances to fuel existing tensions. Emphasizing their domestic roots, they draw on narratives of the historical Macina Empire to gain popular support and allude to the reinstatement of the Macina Empire, dominated by the Fulani ethnic group and under Islamic rule. Their effectiveness stems from using radio to communicate in Fulfude (the native Fulani language), endorsing feelings of injustice and discrimination while calling for more equality of opportunity and political reform."

There is a contradiction: the state's actions and policies serve as a potent rhetoric for the radicalisation of communities that are supposed to be under state protection, thereby escalating the threat of insurgent violence. Once more, the dynamics associated with this radicalisation lead to a substantial disintegration of structures that the state could otherwise utilise to improve security outcomes. Cissé's (2020) account of Fulani perspectives on the insurgency serves as an illustration of this decline. This demonstrates that the Fulani community leaders' efforts to alter the radical and extremist perspectives of the Fulani people towards the Malian government frequently fail due to the dissolution of trust. According to Cissé (2020: n.p.), 'critics feel [that] Fulani leaders did nothing at the height of their power to improve the lives of poor Fulani pastoralists'. Rising to defend the Fulani cause and appealing for nonviolence now, after the conflict

has already erupted, has not significantly swayed the opinions of many pastoralists. Quoting pastoralists, he writes:

> "…in some cases, these calls have sharpened grievances. Some pastoralists speak scornfully of 'sons of farmers' in ministerial posts having responsibility for 'every inch of rural land' (implying the system favors farmers' interests over those of pastoralists). This rhetoric has fanned the flames of old grudges between different members of the Fulani community itself. For instance, many Fulani pastoralists are wary of negotiations with the government since they feel that they never received the reparations promised them in deals struck back in the 1990s."

Consequently, the conditioning of demographic groups towards membership in violent extremist groups increases the likelihood of state failure. According to the literature, this condition encompasses the inability of state institutions to maintain control over violence through the imposition of order (King & Leng, 2001) and lapses in state capacity (Hameiri, 2007). It also includes the absence of the rule of law, political instability, economic and social instability, lack of security, authoritarian rule, impunity, loss of territorial control, human rights violations, social cohesion, corruption, and a weak bureaucracy (Silva, 2014).

Already, the Malian state, beleaguered by repeated fatigue from battling waves of brutal assaults on state authority by violent extremist groups, has increasingly found it difficult to effectively manage the threat posed by irredentist movements operating within its territory. The country currently faces the prospect of a growing insurgency by the Tuareg ethnic group.

Conclusion

Violent contestations of the authority of Sahelian states are bound to aggravate and decline further. The failure of states to properly mitigate the dangers from violent extremist organisations (VEOs) has created an environment that military players have exploited to assert control over political structures. Yet, while such regimes have presented themselves as more 'effective alternatives' to previously inept civilian administrations, there remains little to suggest that these regimes, through their policies and strategies, have not become vectors of the very threats they seek to resolve.

This paper explored the connections between the existence of these regimes and their role as mobilisers for rebel governance. As the paper argues, in the Sahel region, particularly in countries like Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, the prevalence of rebel governance has become increasingly significant. Insurgent groups have filled the vacuum left by the state, providing essential services such as security, social services, and even justice. These groups often form networks with local elites and establish alternative institutions, which are sometimes more effective and less corrupt than those of the state. This process results in the creation of parallel governance structures, also known as

'states-within-states', which challenge the authority of national governments and further entrench violent extremism.

The region has evolved into a primary hub of global terrorism, with various franchises of transnational terrorist groups establishing control over vast territories, collecting taxes, and enforcing strict social regulations. This erosion of state authority has contributed to the region's instability, making it a fertile ground for extremist activities. The increasing trend of military coups in the Sahel has aggravated this issue, as the shift towards military governance has centralised power around the military, often worsening the security situation rather than improving it. These regimes tend to focus narrowly on security, sidelining broader human needs and perpetuating the cycle of violence.

Military governments in the region do more harm than good when it comes to addressing security concerns. In countries like Mali and Burkina Faso, the military has outsourced security functions to external actors such as the Wagner Group or relied on poorly trained civilian militias. This approach has led to widespread human rights abuse and further destabilisation, eroding trust between the state and its citizens and creating conditions ripe for continued violence and conflict. This constitutes a paradoxical situation: by relying heavily on military force and neglecting broader security concepts such as human security, these regimes have become part of the problem rather than the solution, deepening the region's insecurity and undermining efforts to establish stable and democratic governance structures.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing or financial interests in the production and publication of this study. All disclosed information is correct to the authors' knowledge.

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The nexus between military rule and private military and security companies in the Sahel and its impact on terrorism[1]

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Abstract:

The tumultuous political landscape in the Sahel, characterised by successive coups by military juntas, has become a fertile ground for terrorists, who exploit the ungoverned spaces created by the gap between states and their people to garner support and expand their influence. Private military and security companies (PMSCs), such as the Africa Corps of the Wagner Group, often sustain these coups by operating beyond legal frameworks, thereby intensifying the already enduring fragility of these states. Not only does this sustain insecurity, but the lack of trust in the state and its security apparatus makes the local population increasingly vulnerable to recruitment by terrorist groups. States such as Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger have a history of military coups and interventions. Therefore, a multidisciplinary approach can evaluate the intricate relationship between military regimes and PMSCs' impact on terrorism by applying a constructivist lens to the case studies. Understanding this nexus is crucial for developing a holistic approach that identifies both the symptoms and root causes of instability and addresses terrorism in the Sahel.

Keywords:

Fragile states; junta; private military and security companies (PMSCs); Sahel; terrorism; Wagner Group.

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Introduction

A confluence of historical, environmental, and political factors shapes the socio-political landscape of the Sahel region, an area with fluctuating borders between the Sahara and Central Africa, profoundly affecting its stability and security. Despite its rich history of being a center for trade and cultural exchange, the political economy of Sahelian countries was the central discourse among global powers after the Second World War. Colonial powers have primarily invested in developing the physical infrastructure of the predominantly agrarian society to facilitate the extraction of natural resources, neglecting human development and poverty alleviation (UNFPA, 2020: 15). Environmental degradation, displacement, and migration due to ongoing hostilities have exacerbated the impact on the political order of the region (UNHCR, 2024). Political instability, marked by numerous coups, civil wars, and ongoing conflicts, has subsequently plagued the Sahel. Increasing state fragility due to weak governance, corruption, and ethnic tensions has created space for the rise of groups such as Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), and Boko Haram, leading to increased violence and insecurity (Dieng, 2022).

Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger, which have experienced significant political turmoil, including coups and military rule, exemplify these complex socio-political dynamics. Despite statistics indicating an improvement in government response to public needs over the last 20 years (Mahmoud & Taifouri, 2023), a February 2019 study highlighted the vulnerable characteristics of the areas where the borders of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger converge (UNFPA, 2020: 22). Socio-economic dynamics, including high population growth rates, unemployment, climate change shocks, and government failures, have contributed to an increase in violent extremism by extremist groups, as highlighted by the study. In response to these attacks, armed or self-defense groups, such as the Tuareg, Imghad, and Allied Self-Defense Group (GATIA), the Movement for the Salvation of Azawad (MS), and others with community ties, have emerged (UNFPA, 2020: 22). From 2022 to 2023, fatalities from terrorism in this region rose from 19,412 to 23,322 (Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2024). Thus, this region has become the epicenter of both intercommunal and terrorist violence, making it difficult to distinguish between the violent actions of different groups. These abuses predominantly occur in rural areas, far from decision-making centers and basic social services, leading to a sense of frustration and helplessness among the local population (UNFPA, 2020: 24).

Furthermore, the involvement of private military and security companies (PMSCs) in the Sahel, with the latest being the Wagner Group, has added a new dimension to the region's conflicts. As changing political dynamics lead to the expulsion of foreign military groups, particularly the French, governments have increasingly turned to PMSCs for support to maintain control and counter insurgent groups (Asadu, 2023a, 2023b).

While PMSCs provide military expertise and direct combat support, their presence has increased tensions with the local populations due to the frequent reports of human

rights abuses by these groups, further alienating them (Parliament, 2021). Scholars are engaged in a heated debate regarding the classification of these companies, specifically whether they should be classified as mercenary groups or private security contractors. This debate underscores the ambiguity within which most of these organisations operate, potentially impacting aspects of accountability. Antipathy and mistrust toward government leadership and the use of PMSCs can have significant implications for terrorism in the Sahel. Terrorist groups capitalise on the resentment of the local population and portray themselves as defenders of foreign interference and corrupt governments. Thus, this narrative can resonate with many, leading to a surge in terrorist recruitment.

Using a constructivist lens on the case studies above, a multidisciplinary approach can look at the complicated relationship between military regimes and the use of PMSCs to fight terrorism. Understanding this nexus is crucial for developing a holistic approach that identifies both the symptoms and root causes of instability and addresses terrorism in the Sahel.

Theoretical framework

Constructivism offers a valuable framework for analysing how states engage with PMSCs. Constructivism posits that human interactions and shared perceptions shape the social world, including political structures and military practices.[4] From this perspective, social norms, identities, and prevailing views of appropriate state behavior influence a state's decision to use PMSCs, not just functional or rational considerations (Hopf, 1994). Constructivists contend that states might choose to avoid employing PMSCs, even if it appears strategically or economically beneficial, because it conflicts with their identity and norms regarding the military's role. This issue is a point of debate between radical and social constructivism (Wendt, 1999).

One study highlighted a social constructivist argument through a case study on Denmark, which, despite facing security challenges, chose not to employ PMSCs because doing so would have conflicted with its national identity and values regarding the military as a public institution (Kaldor, 2012). While social constructivism focuses on how these socially constructed understandings influence state decisions about PMSCs, radical constructivists emphasise the deeper role of these social constructs in shaping such decisions (Ruggie, 1998). Additionally, constructivism sheds light on how the rise of PMSCs has contributed to reshaping social perceptions of the military and security. The growing prevalence of PMSCs has challenged traditional views of the military as a state-controlled public institution, fuelling the 'privatization of security' (Miller, 2012). Overall, constructivism is a useful way to think about how social, normative, and

[4]Neoclassical geopolitics, likewise, underscores the significance of agents' perceptions in influencing the behaviour of states (Morgado, 2023).

identity-based factors affect states' policies and choices about hiring private security and military companies, going beyond just practical or material factors (Werner, 2011).

Under military rule, there is a deep intertwining of the state's identity with the military's identity, reflecting the constructivist concept of shared identity. This identity often emphasises security, order, and control. PMSCs, which provide security services, align with and reinforce these aspects of the state's identity (Wendt, 1999). The military and PMSCs share a common understanding of their societal roles, which facilitates their collaboration. Military regimes typically establish and promote norms that prioritize security and stability over other considerations, like civil liberties or democratic governance. PMSCs operate within these norms, offering services that support the regime's objectives. From a constructivist perspective, the military regime's security-focused discourse normalizes the presence of PMSCs (Avant, 2005).

Shared beliefs and narratives construct the legitimacy of PMSCs under military rule. Military regimes may depict PMSCs as crucial partners in maintaining order and defending the state against internal and external threats. This narrative helps legitimise the use of PMSCs in the eyes of the public and other state actors (Krahmann, 2010). The perception that PMSCs are effective and necessary for security is a socially constructed idea, which military regimes can shape by highlighting successful operations carried out by PMSCs, thereby reinforcing their role and justifying their continued use (Krahmann, 2010).

Both military regimes and PMSCs undergo socialization processes that bring their behaviors and objectives into alignment. Military personnel and PMSC operatives often share similar training, values, and operational doctrines, fostering a cohesive security apparatus where both entities understand and support each other's roles (Joachim & Schneiker, 2020). The relationship between military regimes and PMSCs is mutually constitutive: military regimes rely on PMSCs to expand their control and security capabilities, while PMSCs gain opportunities and legitimacy through their association with the military. This interdependence reinforces the roles and identities of both actors within the security landscape, supporting both radical and social constructivism (Kruck, 2020).

Constructivism underscores the influence of dominant discourses on shaping political realities, with a focus on security and stability under military rule. PMSCs are integrated into this discourse as crucial players in achieving these goals. The language and narratives employed by the military regime promote the involvement of PMSCs, framing them as essential. Their social and discursive interactions shape the power dynamics between military regimes and PMSCs; PMSCs gain influence by aligning with the regime's discourse, while the regime strengthens its power by utilising the specialised capabilities of PMSCs. This dynamic interaction further solidifies the relationship between the two (Leander & Wæver, 2022).

Constructivism highlights the social construction and reinforcement of the legitimacy and perceived necessity of PMSCs through mutual socialization, dominant discourses, and interdependent power dynamics (Spearin, 2017). This perspective highlights the significance of ideas, beliefs, and social structures in understanding the intricate relationship between military regimes and private security providers in the Sahel region (Leander & Wæver, 2022).

The African Convention on Mercenarism was designed to curb the spread of dubious enterprises and foster regional collaboration. While the goal was commendable, the action plan was too broad, leaving room for ambiguity. The pursuit of regional consensus overshadowed key contentious issues like rules of engagement and the criminal liability of security personnel in death cases.

The primary issue lies in defining the scope of activity between military rule and private security companies. Military coalitions stationed in the Sahel, such as MINUSMA, AFRICOM, and G5, operate with a high level of secrecy, rarely discussing their use of private enterprises (Reno, 2020). The silence is only broken by tragedies, such as the October 4, 2017, ambush in Niger that resulted in the deaths of nine military personnel, including four members of the US Special Forces (Department of Defense, DoD, 2018). The Pentagon never disclosed the identity and employer of a civilian intelligence officer among the victims. A civilian Bell 214 helicopter from another private firm, stationed in Niger, was required for the evacuation of the wounded. Additionally, a commercial enterprise may have been employed in the Sahel to assist U.S. forces with freight, passenger, and medical evacuation operations (Leander, 2020). This reality on the ground illustrates that private enterprises can be involved before, during, and after counterterrorism operations.

Focusing on Burkina Faso, Niger, and Mali reinforces the argument for constructivism: when military rule fails to adequately address the areas of operation and responsibility overlap (Bagayoko, 2021), it significantly increases the demand for private security agencies (Ba, 2019). The constructivist view, especially when viewed through the lenses of radical and social constructivism, emphasizes the influence of ancillary units on power management (Krahmann, 2018).

Methodology

This paper employs a qualitative research method with an exploratory approach, focusing on the Sahel region and the role of the military in conjunction with PMSCs (King et al., 2016). The research is desk-based, relying on major reports from security departments, government white papers, international security indices, and news reports as primary sources. We use secondary research data, including academic articles and journals on related topics, to delve deeper into the subjective and intersubjective aspects of military rule. The theoretical framework is developed through the juxtaposition of

social and radical constructivist perspectives (Charbonneau, 2020). A thematic literature review on the security status of the Sahel region, specifically Burkina Faso, Niger, and Mali, supports the constructivist argument.

We use a case study method to analyse the research data and examine the role of military rule in the Sahel, exploring the reasons for the demand for private agencies and their effectiveness (Berndtsson, 2019). The study's thematic overview reveals that Sahelian countries are fully responsible for choosing which corporations can operate within their borders. This gatekeeping role is crucial and is likely to become increasingly significant in the future (Francis, 2019). However, while the ground reality might differ, further research could either support or challenge the perception of the need for PMSCs alongside military rule in the Sahel region.

Historical context of military rule in the Sahel

Throughout its history, the Sahel has seen numerous coups and governance failures. This region has experienced numerous instances of military interventions replacing civilian governments. External powers have also played a role in the dynamic of military rule in the Sahel, reflected by the disparate reactions based on various geopolitical interests, such as those stemming from the proxy wars between the United States (US) and Soviet Union during the Cold War, the pervasive effects of which have carried forward to this day. Colonial rule, primarily by France, imposed arbitrary borders and administrative systems that often disregarded ethnic and cultural differences and put into power various unrepresentative elites (UNFPA, 2020: 22). After gaining independence from France, five of the six Sahelian countries endured prolonged periods of military rule. In the 1960s and 1970s, the armed forces in Niger, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Mauritania established military dictatorships. In contrast, Chad's military was unable to prevent the country's fragmentation, which eventually led to their own disintegration. Senegal was the only country where civilian rulers maintained control (Villalón, 2021).

Many Sahelian states remain underdeveloped, with power often concentrated in the hands of narrow elites disconnected from the broader population (Mahmoud & Taifouri, 2023). In the last four years, the Sahel has witnessed at least five successful military coups, including in Burkina Faso, Niger, and Mali (Mahmoud & Taifouri, 2023). The commonalities in all the coups were the accusations of corruption and the deterioration of security, with the army bearing the standard of change in governance (Devermont, 2019). Additionally, the state structures were characterized by fragile yet democratically elected governments, with the armed forces providing the necessary security. This 'militarization of politics' highlights the dependency of the civilian governments on the armed forces of their states to validate their governance (Wilén, 2021). In the more recent coups of 2020-2023, young and populist leaders have emerged, standing in stark contrast to their predecessors. These leaders understand the needs of the predominantly young population in the Sahel countries, where weak

power structures, low levels of education, and slow economic growth have hindered youth advancement, leaving them vulnerable to terrorist recruitment (Mahmoud & Taifouri, 2023).

Since the 2014 uprising against President Blaise Compaoré, who had been in power for 27 years, instability in Burkina Faso has been on the rise. Since 2016, extremist groups have consistently targeted military forces and civilians (Dieng, 2022). These groups have established a strong presence in Burkina Faso and neighboring states like Mali. Additionally, conflicts have arisen between these groups due to ideological differences stemming from their support for either Al Qaeda or ISIS (Dieng, 2022). The development of resistance units in a region under threat from terrorists and other illegal factions is a result of the fragile existence of state organizations far from the capital city and the people's lack of trust in them (Aubyn et al., 2022: 1-7).

Although originally seen as legitimate, these self-defense groups have also been involved in several deadly ethnic and communal conflicts, bringing their activities under scrutiny for alleged human rights violations (Dieng, 2022). Due to the deteriorating security situation and increasing frustrations within the security services regarding the government's inadequate response to the escalating rate of terrorism, Lieutenant Colonel Paul-Henri Damiba led a coup in January 2022, detaining then-President Roch Marc Christian Kaboré and seizing power. However, Captain Ibrahim Traoré overthrew him in a subsequent coup in September 2022, citing his failure to fulfill his pledge to enhance security (Arslan, 2023). Currently, Traoré enjoys public support due to his anti-colonialist views and populist speeches (Arslan, 2023).

The downfall of Amadou Toumani Touré's government in 2012 has left Mali mired in constant disagreement (International Crisis Group, ICG, 2016). Captain Amadou Sonogo led the coup, accusing the Touré government of failing to manage the ongoing insurgencies and failing to equip the army (Aubyn et al., 2022: 1–7). After the overthrow of the government, insurgents and extremists took control of the regional capitals, negatively impacting the security situation (Chauzal & van Damme, 2015). This situation bears similarities to the Tuareg Rebellions that occurred in the 1960s, 1990s, and 2007 in the North, where the Tuareg people rebelled against the central government due to their mistrust of those in power (Ba, 2014).

Despite various peace agreements over the years, nothing has suppressed the disagreements, including in these communities, due to a lack of trust. Other ethnic groups have also engaged in armed violence in post-colonial Mali. Thus, the past decade has witnessed constant battles between the Malian army and armed groups in the North, as well as between these groups and those classified as terrorist groups (Dieng, 2022).

International forces, including French troops, the US military, and the 'United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali' (MINUSMA), have been involved in these conflicts (United Nations Peacekeeping, 2023). In 2020, public discontent over corruption, mismanagement of public funds, and failure to contain

terrorism caused Malian soldiers led by Colonel Assimi Goïta to force the then civilian president Boubacar Keïta to resign and then handed over power to the new civilian government (Aubyn et al., 2022: 1-7). However, tensions persisted between the military and the new civilian government, with Goïta eventually leading another coup in 2021 against President Bah N'daw and his government and forcing them to resign. This time, Goïta announced and signed a decree in 2022 officially prolonging military rule for at least two years (Al Jazeera, 2021).

Since gaining independence in 1958 from French colonial rule, Niger has experienced four incidences of military rule. A military unit attempted to seize the presidential palace in Niamey in March 2021, just days before President Bazoum took office (Mahmoud & Taifouri, 2023). Although he survived this coup attempt and another one a year later, the coup of 2023 ultimately removed him (Asadu, 2023b). The coups in Niger, which demonstrated the extent of power struggles among various corridors of power, were characterized by an underlying ethnic sensitivity, as President Bazoum belonged to an ethnic minority, unlike his rivals. These recurring coups and attempted coups highlight the lack of stability required to combat terrorism and violent extremism, particularly in the Tillaberi and Diffa regions (Aubyn et al., 2022: 1–7).

Additionally, Niger shares boundaries with Burkina Faso and Mali and thus has handled severe instability and security concerns due to military conflicts involving state forces, armed groups, and extremist factions over the past decade. Internal violence and spillover effects from neighboring conflicts have further exacerbated Niger's security challenges (Dieng, 2022).

Year	Coup leader	Affected president
Burkina Faso		
2022	Captain Ibrahim Traoré	Lt. Col. Paul Henri Damiba
2022	Lt. Col. Paul Henri Damiba	Roch Kaboré
1987	Blaise Compaoré	Thomas Sankara
1983	Thomas Sankara	Jean-Baptiste Ouédraogo
1982	Jean-Baptiste Ouédraogo	Saye Zerbo
1980	Saye Zerbo	Sangoulé Lamizana
1966	Sangoulé Lamizana	Máurice Yaméogo
Mali		
2021	Assimi Goïta	Bah N'Daw
2020	Assimi Goïta	Ibrahim Keïta
2012	Amadou Sonogo	Amadou Toumani Touré
1991	Amadou Toumani Touré	Moussa Traoré
1968	Moussa Traoré	Modibo Keita

Niger		
2023	Gen. Abdourahamane Tchiani	Hamani Diori
2010	Salou Djibo	Mahamane Ousmane
1999	Daouda Malam Wanke	Ibrahim Baré Maïnassara
1996	Ibrahim Baré Maïnassara	Mamadou Tandja
1974	Seyni Kountché	Mohamed Bazoum

Figure 1: Successful military coups in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger, 1960–2023 (Aubyn, et al., 2022: 1-7).

The emergence of terrorist groups in the Sahel

The instability in the Sahel has facilitated the rise of several terrorist groups. These groups have engaged in various terrorist activities to coerce and pressurise Sahelian populations and government decision-makers. Weak state institutions around interstate borders have allowed these groups to thrive in peripheral and border towns, targeting people across multiple countries by exploiting low security along borders to move freely between neighbouring countries (Dieng, 2022).

Despite several international military efforts to counter these groups, such as MINUSMA, the French Operation Burkhane, and the G-5 Sahel Force, the Sahel region has become a hub for some of the world's most dangerous terrorist groups. The most active groups in the region, Jama'a Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), are vying for dominance, leading to a sharp increase in attacks in northern and central Mali, western Niger, and northern and eastern Burkina Faso. These groups have taken advantage of local ethnic divisions, while self-defence groups, vigilantes, and community-based militias have become increasingly involved in counterterrorism efforts. This has led to cycles of localized intercommunal violence, marked by retaliatory killings between terrorist groups and communal self-defense forces (Raleigh et al., 2020).

Niger faces complex security challenges, including insurgencies by IS Sahel, JNIM, and Boko Haram in its western and southern regions. Organised banditry and militancy, primarily by IS near its southern border, further complicate the situation. The country's shared borders with Chad and Libya exacerbate these issues, facilitating smuggling and trafficking, which in turn attracts additional armed groups. These dynamics are spilling over into other Sahel states, such as Mali (ACLED, 2023). In Mali, the transition back to civilian rule in 2013 did not enhance security as hoped. Terrorist groups persisted in their violent activities. The 2015 Algiers Peace Reconciliation Agreement, which aimed to settle disputes between the Malian government and northern rebel groups, did not include terrorist factions, which then expanded their operations.

By late 2015, these groups had spread to central Mali and allied with the Macina Liberation Front (MLF), causing further spillover of terrorist activities to Burkina Faso

and Niger. Ansarul Islam initiated attacks in Burkina Faso, transforming the Western Sahel into the epicenter of terrorist activity in Africa by 2017, with Mali being the most affected (ACLED, 2023).

Role of PMSCs in contemporary conflicts

Scholars hail the concept of mercenaries participating in conflicts as the 'second oldest trade' (Olsen, 2022). Scholars apply the term 'mercenary' to various figures throughout history, each with their own unique motivations for participating in a conflict and offering a variety of services (Olsen, 2022). Various political entities fragmented sovereignty during the Middle Ages in Europe. These actors often waged wars through mercenaries and claimed overlapping authority over people and territories, with rulers rarely holding absolute power. However, as states emerged as the dominant international actors, they outlawed non-state armed groups such as mercenaries to prevent challenges to their authority (Besenyő & Romaniuk, 2024). The monopoly on force was a cornerstone of the modern state system (McFate, 2004: 7).

With the advent of globalization and the emergence of new and hybrid transnational security threats, such as proxy wars and terrorism, the idea of regular warfare merged with the gray zone. The private military industry surged, particularly after the Cold War (Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance, DCAF, 2024). The states are no longer the only actors in international affairs; they now compete with multinational corporations, international organizations like the United Nations, and NGOs. The Middle Ages resemble this multicentered world where various state and non-state actors share authority. Some scholars have termed this trend toward a non-state-centric, multipolar world order, characterized by overlapping authorities and allegiances, as neomedievalism (McFate, 2004: 7). Thus, some scholars suggest that PMSCs have expanded and formalized the social constructs and roles of mercenaries.

The moniker of 'mercenary' is 'a political judgement that carries with it normative assumptions about a hierarchy of 'rightful' combatants' and that therefore those who were not rightful combatants were described as 'mercenary' (Olsen, 2022). However, it is important to first differentiate between PMSCs and mercenaries as per international law. Officially, PMSCs are private enterprises that offer military or security services to states or other organisations.

According to Article 47 of Additional Protocol I (AP I) to the Geneva Conventions, a mercenary is:

> "…any person who is 1) specially recruited locally or abroad in order to fight in an armed conflict, 2) takes a direct part in hostilities, 3) is motivated to take part in the hostilities essentially by the desire for private gain, 4) neither a national of

a party to the conflict nor a resident of territory controlled by a party to the conflict, 5) is not a member of the armed forces of a party to the conflict, 6) has not been sent by a state that is not party to the conflict on official duty as a member of its armed forces (International Committee of the Red Cross, ICRC, n.d.)."

The classification of PMSC personnel as mercenaries under AP I is uncommon. International Humanitarian Law (IHL) does not forbid the use of PMSCs or mercenaries during armed conflicts, but two separate conventions do (RULAC Geneva Academy, 2021). The 1977 Organisation of African Unity Convention for the Elimination of Mercenarism in Africa (Organisation of African Unity. OAU, n.d.) and the 1989 International Convention Against the Recruitment, Use, Financing, and Training of Mercenaries (General Assembly resolution 44/34, 1989).

These legally binding conventions do not only criminalise the employment of mercenaries but also their participation in armed conflicts. However, only 35 countries have ratified the convention, and none of the permanent members of the UN Security Council, particularly the US, Russia, and UK, have become members due to their use of PMSCs (Klaassen, 2023). Some have suggested that the contestation over the too-limited definition of mercenary could be the cause (Riordan, 1989). Of the three Sahel countries discussed in this paper, only Mali has ratified the convention (UN Treaty Collections, 2001).

International law identifies PMSCs as commercial entities that provide a range of military and security services, irrespective of their self-description as a PMC, MC, or any other variation of the term.

These services typically include armed protection of individuals and property, such as convoys and buildings; the maintenance and operation of weapon systems; detention of prisoners; and the training and advising of local military and security personnel (ICRC, 2013). States use the Montreux Document, a non-binding international instrument, to guide their use of these companies (ICRC, 2013). Additionally, the International Code of Conduct for Private Security Service Providers (ICoCa) outlines the obligations of PMSCs (Montreux Document Forum, n.d.). Typically PMSCs are not parties to a conflict. However, their personnel may be considered civilians directly participating in hostilities if their actions meet the criteria for direct participation as per Article 51(3) of AP I and Article 13(3) of Additional Protocol II.

A PMSC could only be considered a party to an armed conflict if it independently engages in hostilities, not as a service provider to a client. In such a scenario, it must be determined if the two IHL criteria are satisfied: (a) the violence between the PMSC and the opposing party must reach a certain level of intensity, and (b) the PMSC must be sufficiently organised (DCAF, 2024). The use of these companies in warfare to achieve military objectives is not a new phenomenon, and it has further complicated our

understanding of modern warfare, especially when it comes to PMSCs claiming defensive functions (DCAF, 2024). The integration of these PMSCs has also raised questions about the nature of their operations in the deployed regions, with many inquiring about the legality and accountability of these companies.

The employment of PMSCs has become a lucrative business due to the existing conflicts and differences between various central governments and their people, which are caused by prevalent insurgencies and terrorists. International involvement, including from the US, France, and the UN, in addressing these insecurities has prompted the call for PMSCs to provide a range of services, including information gathering, security protocol, and training local armed forces (Menas, 2019). This allows conventional armed forces to have a limited, ceremonial role and brings PMSCs to the forefront. International law restricts the role of PMSCs for defensive purposes, as previously highlighted. However, legal ambiguities often lead to the misuse of this element. When a government transfers troops from regular units that are accountable for their actions to civilian commercial organisations, allowing PMSCs to play a more front-line role creates room for deniability (Menas, 2019).

The interplay between military rule and PMSCs

The concept of 'ungoverned spaces' in the Sahel has allowed political opportunists to exploit the security sector for personal gain, which has led to a 'security traffic jam' (Middle East Council on Global Affairs, 2022). This exploitation has led to the creation of initiatives such as the G5 Sahel Joint Force and the militarised agendas of both Sahelian governments and external actors, such as France. It is also difficult to ignore that these Sahelian countries provide economic incentives in the form of unexploited minerals. Poorly equipped Sahelian governments focus on asserting control over territories and populations in these areas with the aid of external actors to prevent the spread of terrorism and possible migration flows to Europe.

However, the colonial past of these countries, in addition to their economic interests in the Sahel, undermines peacebuilding efforts. These factors increase the antipathy of the local populace toward them (Igbinadolor, 2023). Consequently, the Sahel has become a battleground for 'new wars', which have been characterised by non-state actors, ambiguous conflict drivers, and indistinguishable conflict phases (Villalón, 2021). Furthermore, even these international military forces have employed PMSCs for security and logistical support. AFRICOM alone lists at least 21 American companies as military service providers in North Africa and the Sahel (Wilén, 2021).

The traditional role of the armed forces is to protect national territories from external threats. However, this primary aim is difficult to carry out in the Sahel because of domestic security challenges (Elischer, 2019). In fragile democracies such as Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso, societal disunity and weak administrative capabilities hinder the

maintenance of a functioning state. Armed groups maintain a violent status quo, making security forces central to stability efforts. The sizes of the countries' armed forces also affect the need for employment of PMSCs, which scholars say often oversee and enforce colonial-era developments and resource exploitation (Aubyn et al., 2022: 1–7). External partners such as PMSCs provide training, equipment, and information operations support to local armed forces to combat violent non-state actors and reinforce state authority. Despite international and regional military deployments, terrorist activities have continued, reinforcing the role of local security forces as primary tools for stability (Wilén, 2021).

Recent political shifts and coups in the Sahel region have sparked anti-French sentiment, resulting in the region's expulsion or withdrawal from Western-backed economic and military alliances. In order to bridge the gap, the Russian government has allegedly unofficially sanctioned the actions of PMSCs like Wagner, who operate in a legal grey area. Although Wagner operates as a PMSC, many scholars view their government ties and unregulated combat roles as closer to the definition of mercenaries. However, this is not an unusual practice in the PMSC industry, as many PMSCs have complex structures to avoid legal scrutiny (Margolin, 2019). Thus, even with the restructuring of Wagner in Africa, now known as the 'Africa Corps', a lack of formal registration does not prevent organisations like Wagner from classification as PMSCs.

Russian critics allege that Russia has used proxies in North Africa and the Sahel, such as the Wagner Group, to disguise its direct government affiliations as part of its hybrid warfare strategy to compete with the west. Wagner's activities allegedly impact the region's democracies, western influence, economic relations, resource access, and overall security (Reynolds, 2019). The US and France have criticised Russia's PMSCs for increasing violent extremism, failing to address armed threats, committing human rights abuses, and endangering UN peacekeepers and staff. Despite these criticisms, some African leaders see Russian PMSCs as viable security alternatives, especially given anti-French sentiment and perceived shortcomings of Western partners. Prior to Wagner's involvement, non-Russian PMSCs posed a threat by addressing human rights issues and escalating terrorism.

Russian PMSCs have been alleged to adopt violent counter-terrorism approaches while insulating dictators with their 'regime survival package' (Watling et al., 2024). Their presence exacerbates terrorist threats and erodes civil-military norms. Russian diplomacy aims to create demand for Russian security assistance by perpetuating conflict, while resource exploitation and mining concessions often accompany these security partnerships (Parens, 2022). Deals with Russian PMSCs frequently involve resource concessions as payment, facilitating Kremlin weapon sales and further embedding Russian influence in the region through potential client states. African leaders perceive the Wagner Group as a more viable security alternative due to its lack of accompanying moral lectures on human rights and democracy. This goes along with the

impression that western states have not done enough to help them via security cooperation, military sales, or counterterrorism operations (Parens, 2022).

Implications for terrorism

The coup in Mali in 2020 did not significantly improve security, resulting in a minor decline in terrorist attacks in areas under junta control, but the overall threat still persists. Similarly, Burkina Faso experienced an increase in terrorist attacks following the removal of President Blaise Compaoré in 2015, with incidents rising fivefold between 2016 and 2019 due to a security vacuum and the disbanding of the elite presidential corps (Parens, 2022). From 2012 to 2019, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger reported 1,463 armed clashes involving 195 armed groups (Raleigh et al., 2020: 1–21). The conflict has expanded both geographically and through alliances, with militants adapting global narratives to local conditions, dynamics, political uncertainties, and grievances to facilitate recruitment and alliance formation. JNIM used a 'pastoralist populism' strategy, integrating local groups into a network appealing to communal groups, while ISGS adopted a 'pillage and reprisal' approach, integrating local groups into a hierarchical system with escalating violence (Raleigh et al., 2020).

'Ethnoculture instrumentalization' has further worsened the situation. Reports indicate that between February 2021 and February 2022, nearly 2,000 civilians lost their lives in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger due to attacks that frequently targeted their ethnic and religious identities and their support for community defense groups (UNFPA, 2020: 31–33). Scholars have proposed that the process that fuels terrorist recruitment, especially among the youth, includes manipulation of religious sentiments and stigmatisation based on ethnicity (UNFPA, 2020). The presence of terrorist groups in the Sahel has also intensified organised crime, including drug trafficking, arms trading, human trafficking, and kidnapping for ransom (Dieng, 2022).

Apart from international efforts, which included France launching Operation Serval in 2013, followed by Operation Barkhane in 2014, deploying 5,000 troops to support Sahelian countries, regional counterterrorism efforts have included the G5 Sahel Joint Force formed in 2017 by Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger, and the Multinational Joint Task Force created in 2014–2015 by several Lake Chad Basin countries to combat terrorism. Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger have also recently signed a mutual defense pact to help each other against armed rebellions and external aggression (Al Jazeera, 2023). However, these operations have faced similar allegations of IHL and IHRL violations as the PMSCs, including targeting civilians, summary executions, torture, rape, and enforced disappearances. Human Rights Watch, the UN, and other organisations have reported over 600 illegal killings by state security forces in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger since the end of 2019 (Zoubir, 2022).

Additionally, concerns exist about human rights abuses committed by troops, such as France's Barkhane forces in 2021, which exacerbate the situation and lead to the perception of western troop deployment and engagement as a continuation of their colonial past (Zoubir, 2022). The inefficient accountability and oversight of state security forces, coupled with the transition to a democratic framework, further alienates the local population and undermines counterterrorism efforts (Wilén, 2021). Furthermore, although these forces have contributed to enhancing the proficiency of Sahelian armies, they have not resulted in any improvement in governance (Camara & Stigant, 2023). The result has been the weakened legitimacy of the state and support by the youth, the expulsion of these forces by Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger, and the pivot towards Russia and partnership with PMSCs such as the Africa Corps of the Wagner Group, though they too face similar allegations (ADF, 2024).

The impact of Africa Corps' activities has created resentment amongst local communities, especially where the youth have joined terrorist groups. Due to the morally contestable methods and approaches employed by Wagner forces, such as executions of suspects, even local populations that were against terrorist groups felt alienated and became sympathetic towards the terrorist outfits (Giustozzi, 2024). Furthermore, allegations of racism have been made within the military units. Different chains of command and poor coordination have resulted in violent clashes between local forces and members of PMSCs such as Wagner (Giustozzi, 2024). This could potentially exacerbate the already existing complex layer of government alienation, even within the armed forces. The use of PMSCs has also raised concerns about the sustainability of counterterrorism operations. While they can provide combat assistance, holding onto territory captured from armed groups and maintaining security in the long term may prove challenging.

PMSCs are not required to provide any additional development initiatives to the local population, unlike state-sponsored or UN-coordinated military endeavours. Their role is solely focused on providing hardcore security to support the ruling regimes, not on mediation, education, or development initiatives (Olech, 2024). Furthermore, there is no guarantee that use of PMSCs will help defeat the terrorist outfits and rebels and could also cause losses to the organisation, thus damaging their marketability or affecting the dynamics in the region as security providers to the ruling juntas (Olech, 2024).

Conclusion

The current trend in the Sahel region reflects a geopolitical shift in the reliance of military juntas on Russian PMSCs as opposed to previous western-backed PMSCs and military forces. Despite a change in partners and regimes, however, there has hardly been a decrease in terrorism in the region encompassing Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso. One could also assume that the region is simply transitioning from one colonial power to another, given that both share similar economic objectives. This has made the local

population even more belligerent towards the central governments, leading to an increase in sympathy towards terrorist groups. The Sahel is fast emerging as a region of proxy war between the west and Russia at the cost of the locals (Rekšáková, 2021). Furthermore, the region may see the addition of other groups, such as Turkish fighters from the Syrian civil war, to counter the existing Africa Corps (Fernandez, 2024).

From a constructivist lens, to counter the increase in terrorism caused indirectly by the employment of PMSCs, the aspects of alienation and mistrust by the people towards their government that are exploited by terrorists looking to recruit members must be addressed. The success and legitimacy of a government are dependent on the goodwill of the citizens toward their leaders (de Montclos, 2021). For this, socialisation through outreach programs, dialogue, peacebuilding, and other development programs that offer communities non-violent economic opportunities are important to build upon the existing positive signs of economic and social development. The UN Human Development Index has increased since the 1990s in the Sahel by almost 1.9 percent per year (Osman, 2021).

While the Wagner Group presents itself as a friend (Patta & Carter, 2023), it is actually just a business conducting a security transaction to gain access to resources. Additionally, a culture of legal oversight is important to strengthen avenues of accountability for human rights abuses. Those with the political will to do so need to localise and enforce the many existing international legal instruments. The Russian government's direct involvement with Wagner through its restructuring and the emergence of the Africa Corps reduces its plausible deniability when using PMSCs (The Nato Strategic Direction-South Hub, 2024). However, that doesn't mean that exploitable legal grey zones have completely disappeared. Therefore, this culture of impunity needs to be addressed in order to restore people's trust in their state institutions. It is through these steps that recruitment into terrorist groups and antipathy towards the central government will decrease.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing or financial interests in the production and publication of this study. All disclosed information is correct to the authors' knowledge.

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A gendered analysis of the wave of coups and terrorism in the Sahel[1]

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Abstract:

The prevalence of coups and terrorism in the Sahel raises serious human security concerns due to their devastating impacts on socio-economic stability, state fragility, and democratisation, among other serious issues. The current wave of coups and terrorism opens avenues for asking questions about the progress of democratisation in Africa, issues of human security, the protection of human rights, and, more specifically, how the prevalence of violence affects women's lives. Hence, it is imperative to interrogate the resultant impact that the prevalence of coups has on the protection of women's rights in the region. Therefore, this paper examines the gendered implications of the prevalence of coups and terrorism in the Sahel region. Using Nigeria and Burkina Faso as case studies, it argues for a gendered understanding of the differential impact that the increasing rate of terrorism, military coups, and worsening state fragility have on women, as well as their corresponding effects. This is in response to the prolonged Boko Haram insurgency in north-eastern Nigeria, which has resulted in a significant loss of life, intense political instability, including the kidnapping of over 300 schoolgirls, and the September 2022 military coup led by Captain Ibrahim Traoré in Burkina Faso, which suspended the constitution and showed no signs of progress towards democratisation. The paper employs qualitative methodology and a thematic analytical framework to interrogate the gendered implications of coups and terrorism for women in the Sahel region. It demonstrates that a gendered analysis of coups and terrorism in the Sahel enables relevant organisations to put in place preventive or mitigating measures to manage hostilities, protect human security, and promote gender equality.

Keywords:
Coups; democratisation; gendered analysis; human security; Sahel; terrorism; women.

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Introduction

The Sahel has become a region plagued with violent conflicts, coups, terrorism, and insurgencies. The prevalence of these conflicts is not a new phenomenon, as the first coup in the region dates to the 1960s, which created a massive contagion effect across the region. According to the Centre for Preventive Action (2024), a confluence of factors has plagued most of the Sahel region's countries with violent extremism since their independence in the 1960s, leading to intricate security and humanitarian issues. Ojoko (2022) highlights that these factors include declining economies, the climate change crisis, and an unstable political system, factors deeply connected to geopolitical analysis (Morgado, 2023).

Albert and Albert (2022) assert that over the past ten years there has been an increase in violence, war, and crime that crosses national borders and presents serious problems for countries inside and outside of the Sahel region. The Centre for Preventive Action (2024) adds that along with the Boko Haram insurgency in Northern Nigeria, violent extremism persists throughout the Lake Chad Basin, which is where Cameroon, Chad, Niger, and Nigeria converge. They note further that the problem of terrorism has expanded from its original concentration in North Africa and the Maghreb region to encompass the entire African continent through the Sahel. Vanguard (2021) explains that due to the rising development in the Sahel, the focus on state terrorism and its connections to coups, security, and stability throughout Africa has become a topic of interest. The upsurge in coups in countries like the Republic of Guinea and Burkina Faso and the undying Boko Haram insurgency in Nigeria have further deepened this interest.

The growing interest in the Sahel region is further consolidated by the increasing attacks on African Union (AU) member states, which appear to be expanding to new states due to concerns about terrorist attacks in previously safe havens such as Togo, Benin, Ghana, and Eswatini, among others (British Broadcasting Corporation, BBC, 2022). The violence in the area is causing a severe humanitarian crisis, jeopardising regional security, and leading to the loss of lives and property (Zuva & Ojo, 2023). Separate from the general consequences that the prevailing coups, terrorism, and violence have on the region, it is important to consider the human security dangers that the crises have. War particularly affects women, leading to a likely regression of women's rights in the region, restrictions on accessing sexual and reproductive healthcare, reduced economic autonomy, and a deterioration of political decision-making in the face of increased violence. This paper presents a gendered analysis of the increasing violence in the Sahel region.

The paper examines the gendered implications of the prevalence of coups and terrorism in the region. Using Nigeria and Burkina Faso as cases, it proposes a gendered understanding of the differential impact that the increasing rate of terrorism, military coups, and worsening state fragility have on women as well as their corresponding

effects. The paper acknowledges the devastating physical, financial, human, and economic consequences of violence while underscoring the need for an investigation into its differential impact on women. It argues that a gendered analysis of coups and terrorism in the Sahel enables relevant bodies to implement preventive or mitigating measures aimed at managing hostilities, safeguarding human security, and promoting gender equality.

The paper begins by probing the discourse on the prevalence of violent conflicts in the Sahel, with a specific focus on coups and terrorism. This section provides context for Burkina Faso and Nigeria as selected cases, as well as the general effects that violent conflicts have on afflicted regions. The second section elucidates the concept of gendered analysis and highlights the disproportionate impact of violent conflicts on women. The third section interrogates the gendered implications that the increasing violence in Nigeria and Burkina Faso have on women and women's rights. The final section concludes the paper while making some relevant recommendations.

Methodology

Qualitative methodology was employed to interrogate the gendered implications of coups and terrorism in the Sahel. This allows the paper to engage in an in-depth analysis of the differentiated impact that coups and terrorism have on women. The study uses Burkina Faso and Nigeria as cases to contextualise the discussion. Using Burkina Faso to represent countries that have recently experienced coups and Nigeria for terrorism due to the long-lived Boko Haram insurgency creates suitable ground to interrogate the human security implication of the prevailing violence in the Sahel. The paper makes use of secondary data primarily journal articles, official reports, news articles that have been written on the precarious situation in the Sahel. The use of secondary data allows the researcher to do an extractive data collection enabling it to provide a different lens to the discourse. Thematic analysis was used as the analysis tool to structure the paper's analysis on how coups and terrorism affect women differently. A thematic analytical framework allows for the paper to structure its discussion based on themes drawn from literature and available data.

A feminist perspective of violence

A feminist perspective on violence explains why women are more susceptible to it than men. Conway (2016) asserts that a theory of violence that lacks a feminist perspective and is gender-blind inherently presents the dominant patriarchal viewpoint. Therefore, the hypothesis only partially reflects how male subjects perceive and experience violence.

Cockburn (2004: 30) asserts that a feminist perspective offers a deeper comprehension of violence by examining its relationship to and integration into

patriarchal power structures. Olaitan (2020) explains that feminism specifically aims to address the underlying causes of patriarchy and gender inequality by attributing women's subjugation to deeply embedded institutions and cultural structures. In the process, it calls for a number of changes, including redefining security, women's inclusion, patriarchy, and a gendered view of violence. Hudson (2009: 67) posits that communities that view women as less valuable and have fewer rights than men inherently make them more vulnerable to violence and death. Olaitan (2023a) adds that a feminist analysis of violence centres women as subjects while understanding how patriarchal structures and norms exacerbate their experience of violence.

In applying a feminist perspective to the prevalent violence in the Sahel, we can recognise how patriarchal and restrictive gender norms make women more susceptible to dangers than men. (Olaitan, 2023b) notes that women's bodies are often weaponised during times of war, often manifesting in increased sexual and gender-based violence, being taken as prisoners of war, regression in women's rights, etc. Hence, a feminist perspective allows us to recognise the gendered impacts that war and violence have on women. Applying a feminist perspective to the Sahel region allows us to acknowledge the distinct effects of war on women. The argument is that in times of war, women are much more likely to suffer more than men due to restrictive patriarchal norms and the masculine form that war takes. Sjoberg (2004) argues in her work on gendering global conflict that understanding the causes and consequences of war requires a gendered analysis in line with the feminist tradition of International Relations (IR).

Coups and terrorism in the Sahel

Bøås (2019) posits that the Sahel represents a unique case in Africa due to the increasing number of coups, insurgencies, transnational organised crime, and violent conflicts. As a result of increased foreign intervention in the region, the issue of state stability in the Sahel is receiving more attention than ever before. Albert and Albert (2022) point out that states in the Sahel region struggle with varied degrees of fragility and inadequate state capacity. Bøås (2019) asserts that the region, despite its minimal contribution to global CO2 emissions, suffers significant negative impacts due to the conflict situation. This unfortunate circumstance further exacerbates the precarious situation of the Sahel region.

The African Terrorism Database (2022) reports that the Sahel has been home to some of the deadliest terrorist groups in the world: Jama'a Nusrat alIslam wal Muslimin (JNIM) and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), and they are the two most active groups in the area. Terrorist groups have claimed several lives through their attacks, forcing millions to flee their homes both domestically and internationally. The G-5 Sahel Force, Operation Barkhane, and the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) are only a few of the several

foreign military missions that have taken place in the region. Apart from terrorism, the region has also seen a rise in banditry, communal violence, and violent extremism, all of which compromise human security in the region (ACRST 2022).

In 2019, there were 408 terrorist activities carried out in the Sahel; this indicates a 32.1% decrease as there were 277 attacks in 2020 (African Terrorism Database, 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic, the counter-terrorism efforts by Operation Barkhane, the G-5 Sahel Joint Taskforce, and Malian forces, as well as the reported disagreement between JNIM and ISGS, are some of the reasons for the decline. The Russian Wagner Group assisted the Central African Republic, Mali, and Burkina Faso in addressing the external aspects of their issues (ACRST, 2022). Fasanotti (2022) argues that by involving the Wagner group, the afflicted countries gained the freedom to carry out counterterrorism and counterinsurgency operations, free from obligations under human rights laws, enabling African governments to use force as ruthlessly as they please in their military campaigns.

Data from the African Centre for the Study and Research on Terrorism (ACSRT) indicate that there was an increase in attacks between 2018 and 2019. The attacks were specifically carried out by the Islamic State of West Africa Province (ISWAP) in Nigeria and Niger, JNIM in Mali and Burkina Faso, ISGS in Burkina Faso and Niger, and Boko Haram and its breakaway faction (Apau & Ziblim 2019). As a result, West Africa reported the greatest number of terrorist incidents in Africa between January 2019 and December 2021. Additionally, the African Terrorism Database (2022) reports that during this period, the region saw 2,602 assaults that claimed 10,899 lives. The attacks hit Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Côte d'Ivoire, Togo, and Benin; during that time, Burkina Faso had a notable increase in the number of fatalities per incident.

Most countries impacted by these recent coups between 2020 and 2022 are at the forefront of the conflict between violent extremism and terrorism. There is concern that terrorist organisations may benefit from the unstable political environment to strengthen their hold and spread to other regions of West Africa and beyond, given the unstable security environment already in place. The influence of illegitimate government changes in the fight against violent extremism and terrorism in Western Sahel, however, is still largely unexplored (ACRST, 2022).

ACRST (2022) reports that there have been roughly 200 military coups on the African continent. Togo successfully carried out the first military coup against Sylvanus Olympio in 1963. Sudan tops the list with seventeen coups. Burundi has witnessed eleven while Sierra Leone and Ghana have both experienced ten. Guinea-Bissau, Burkina Faso, Nigeria, and Comoros combined have reported nine coups, while Mali and the Republic of Benin have reported eight. There have been seven military takeovers in Niger and Chad. Ojoko (2022) confirms that West Africa is both the center of a violent crisis and the continent's hotspot for military takeovers. These coups serve as a constant reminder that autocracies and elected administrations alike are susceptible to military takeovers

(Ubi & Ibonye, 2019). Akufo-Addo (2022) stressed that certain African countries repeatedly undergo unconstitutional government changes due to a variety of factors, such as poor governance, political instability, a failure to grasp opportunities, marginalisation, violations of human rights, an inability to accept electoral defeat, and the manipulation of constitutions through unconstitutional means to further narrow personal interests.

The recent surge of violence in the Sahel is not a new phenomenon, as most of these states encountered political instability in one form or another following their independence in the early 1960s. McGowan and Johnson (1984) explicate that a military coup typically overthrew a democratically elected government, or a countercoup overthrew another military dictatorship. The resulting security conditions brought on by the guaranteed political instability adversely affected the states' overarching developmental goals. A movement for multi-party democracy in the late 1980s and early 1990s resulted in the adoption of multi-party democracy in several African countries, notably those in West Africa and the Sahel. However, numerous disruptions have plagued this movement, most recently in 2022.

Rizk (2021) reasons that the threat of terrorism has disproportionately affected most Sahel countries. He notes that factors such as poor governance, historical grievances, weak institutions, and porous borders, contribute to the increased violence. Additional factors include impunity, poverty, absence of the rule of law, injustice, corruption, and a lack of economic possibilities. At its 455th meeting[3] the AU Peace and Security Council identified several factors that contribute to the spread of violent extremism and terrorism in the Sahel region. A number of factors contribute to the proliferation of violent extremism and terrorism in the Sahel, including the absence of the rule of law, violations of human rights, prolonged and unresolved wars, discrimination, political isolation, socioeconomic marginalisation, and poor governance. ACRST (2022) explains that these factors have served as stimulants for violent extremist and terrorist groups to broaden their goals, capacities, and geographic reach throughout Africa, with disastrous effects on both economic growth and public safety.

The international community has responded to the worsening security situation in the Western Sahel through numerous military deployments both internationally and regionally. Nonetheless, terrorist activities have persisted despite the deployments. ACRST 2022 notes that a resurgence of coups d'état around the region has threatened to exacerbate an already unstable situation, even as the AUC and its allies are devising creative strategies to curb the scourge.

[3] See, 455th PSC Reports. https://www.peaceau.org/en/article/455th-meeting-of-peace-and-securitycouncil-communique-and-report

The Boko Haram insurgency in Nigeria

Boko Haram gained international prominence with the kidnapping of 274 schoolgirls in Chibok, Nigeria, in April 2014 (NigerianEye, 2019). Prior to the kidnapping, the group had already killed hundreds, kidnapped tens of thousands, and displaced nearly two million people (Giplin, 2019).

Boko Haram, a name that roughly translates from Hausa as 'Western Education is Evil/Forbidden', stems from the belief that the Nigerian government is morally repugnant, motivated by greed, and reliant on the Christian West (Walker, 2016). This is due to the long-held narrative that, during and after colonisation, only a favoured ethnic elite had access to English and Christian schools, which allowed for access to power and the advancement of commercial and professional careers. They saw the 'Western' education system as fundamental to the exploitation, repression, inequality, and dominance that characterised colonialism during the colonial era (Buchanan-Clarke & Knoope, 2018).

Emanating from this radical rejection of Western education, Boko Haram developed into a notorious terrorist organisation. They have so far killed almost 26,000 civilians and forced millions to flee their homes in Northern Nigeria (Amnesty International, 2015). The group, now extending into the Lake Chad region, is carrying out attacks in Cameroon, Chad, and Niger. President Buhari restructured Nigeria's counter-insurgency strategy and enhanced regional coordination through the Multinational Joint Task Force (Walker, 2016). These developments have significantly reduced Boko Haram's capacity to maintain territory and launch cross-border attacks (Amnesty International, 2015).

However, Boko Haram's insurgency has resulted in significant humanitarian losses. Buchanan-Clarke and Knoope (2018: 2) state that thousands of Nigerians have died since the start of the insurgency in 2010, with the majority of the population in north-east Nigeria displaced from their homes and communities. Boko Haram persisted in carrying out attacks throughout 2016 in northeastern Nigeria and the Lake Chad region, including suicide bombings, widespread sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), kidnappings, and forced recruitment, despite the Nigerian Armed Forces and Multi-National Joint Task Force (MNTJF) making significant progress against the insurgency (Zorthian, 2015).

Apart from the disturbance of economic activities and food production, this has led to a significant increase in poverty and deprivation (UNHCR, 2017). Amnesty International (2017) reported that the insurgency has internally displaced an estimated 2 million people in Northern Nigeria, with 80% residing in host communities and the remaining population in camps for internally displaced people (IDPs).

Military coups in Burkina Faso

Yeboah and Aikins (2024) highlight that two military coups occurred in Burkina Faso in 2022 as a part of an African wave of military takeovers. They note that Captain Ibrahim Traoré, who led the second coup, became the country's interim president and subsequently the country's leader. Sawo (2017) asserts that Burkina Faso is one of the few countries in West Africa with a history marred by coups. The first military coup, which took place in 1966, six years after independence, acted as a catalyst for subsequent coups, with military officials overthrowing each other to seize power.

In 1987, the nation's longest period without a coup d'état started. In this year, Blaise Compaoré succeeded in ousting Thomas Isidore Noël Sankara, a Burkinabé military commander, Marxist revolutionary, and pan-Africanist theorist (Murrey, 2018). He remained in power for 27 years, from 1987 to 2014, when he was forced to resign due to widespread public outcry (Ludicon, 2014). In 2015, Burkina Faso witnessed a protest demanding the removal of former President Blaise Compaoré, who had ruled the country for 27 years by 2013. Therefore, the constitution prohibited him from running for president in the 2015 election (Ludicon, 2014). However, Compaoré withstood popular protests and army mutinies demanding his resignation, having previously manipulated term restrictions. He intended to amend the constitution in October 2014 so that he could run for office once more. Since his party held two-thirds of the legislature, the strategy was successful. This triggered demonstrations, which quickly spread beyond the country's capital, Ouagadougou (Taylor, 2014). The protests forced Compaoré to resign from his position and leave the country. November 2015 saw the election of Roch Marc Christian Kaboré as president, and November 2020 saw another election (Sawo, 2017).

Moreover, anger mounted at the proliferation of violent jihadist acts that surfaced in the country in 2016 (Sawo, 2017). Attacks connected to the Islamic State and Al-Qaeda were becoming more frequent. Similar to what happened in Mali, discontent with the government's handling of the worsening security situation and the incapacity to stop Islamist violence was growing among the populace as well as among the security services. On January 11, 2022, the government arrested eight soldiers for allegedly organising a project to destabilise the country's institutions (Al Jazeera, 2022). Under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Paul-Henri Damiba, elements of the army captured President Kaboré on January 24 and took control of the country. The leader of the coup condemned the president's tactics against terrorists who practice Islam. Administration after administration has failed to stop the insurgents linked to the Islamic State (IS) and Al Qaeda from spreading bloodshed. Abuses committed by state security forces and militias appear to have aided insurgency recruiting (Sawo, 2017). Due to a combination of frequent coups and jihadist attacks, the country is experiencing a worsening humanitarian crisis.

Numerous factors have contributed to the frequency of military coups that occurred in Burkina Faso between 1980 and 2015. The most significant factor is the military's financial interests being invaded (Sawo, 2017). Thomson (2010) adds that, as the keeper and manager of state violence, the military decided to turn violence against the state and seize political power, despite its obligation to remain obedient to political authorities. Entrusted with the responsibility of protecting the state from violence, the Burkina Faso military instead exploits this authority in reverse to incite military coups and countercoups, ultimately installing themselves as political leaders. Since independence, the Burkinabe army has operated in this manner, meddling in national politics. The military's frequent participation in politics has starved Burkina Faso's long road to democratisation, leaving its neutrality hazy and needle-like (Ludicon, 2015).

Terrorism and coups: Rise and impacts

There are a wide range of devastating effects that arise from violent conflict, such as worsening economic conditions, political instability, state fragility, and humanitarian crises. Mueller and Tobias (2016) emphasise that states experiencing violence often struggle to maintain resilience in the face of conflict, as poverty, instability, violence, and fragility often reinforce each other in a vicious cycle. This lack of resilience in the face of growing violence leads to state fragility such that the state is unable to protect itself from both internal and external threat as seen in most states in the Sahel. They add that the biggest danger to long-term growth and development in afflicted countries is the recurrence of violence (Mueller & Tobias, 2016).

The African Development Bank (ADB) (2009) notes that violent conflicts are one of the three main causes of death on the continent. Furthermore, wars continue to impact people's lives even after the cessation of hostilities. Wars also result in decapitation from sustained injuries and an increase in the prevalence of illnesses such as HIV/AIDS. Conflict-afflicted countries run the risk of increased HIV infections and deaths due to the demands of violence. Human rights violations against civilians and sexual assaults are some of the obvious effects of violent conflicts. Civilians make up the majority of the victims of violent conflict, which leaves them traumatised when they endure or witness horrific incidents such as shootings, killings, rape, torture, and the deaths of family members (ADB, 2009). Indirect impacts include the collapse of public services such as health, education, and political institutions, as well as effects that spread to other countries, such as refugee problems. Additionally, the resulting insecurity has the potential to impede economic activities.

The increasing violence and instability in the Sahel have led to a serious humanitarian crisis, with a large number of displaced individuals now dispersed across the continent. War and violent conflict in Africa exacerbate numerous issues, including poverty and food insecurity, as noted by Zuva and Ojo (2023). African countries experiencing conflict and warfare have a lower development index compared to countries without

wars, as most war-torn countries have the lowest development index and the highest rates of poverty when examining their social indicators (Mueller & Tobias, 2016).

Tankink et. al (2021) write that mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, or post-traumatic stress disorder often affect 22% of population living in conflict-afflicted regions. They note that 9% of these populations have moderate-to-severe symptoms, demonstrating that violent conflict experiences and mental health are all correlated in a complicated way. Persistent structural violence prevalent in conflict environments can lead to considerable stress and consequently psychological issues that impact an individual's well-being.

What does a gender(ed) analysis entail?

According to Schob and LeBrun (2019), gender analysis is the cornerstone of any gender mainstreaming strategy because decisions must first assess the state of gender equality in a given context. 'Gender analysis involves acknowledging the historical and social inequalities faced by women and aims to inform the design of policies, programmes and projects to address these inequalities' (European Institute for Gender Equality, EIGE, 2019: 3).

To understand the state of gender disparities, gender analysis is useful as it adopts several methodologies and concepts (SIDA, 2015). It employs concepts like gender and sex to differentiate between socially constructed and biological disparities. This distinction is helpful despite criticism that gender is evolving and is dependent on society and norms. Sex denotes biological distinctions between men and women, independent of age, ethnicity, or other factors. When conducting a gender analysis, the disaggregation includes sex. Gender denotes socially constructed distinctions between sexes, the expectations and norms placed on men and women, as well as the definitions of femininity and masculinity. EIGE (2019) explains that, when examining how men and women—girls and boys—relate to one another in terms of their disparate access to opportunities in life, vulnerabilities, and methods for bringing about change, a gendered lens is essential.

Gender analysis provides the data and knowledge needed to incorporate a gender perspective into initiatives, programmes, and policies. It helps to establish the distinctions between and among men and women with regard to their respective roles in society and the allocation of opportunities, resources, limitations, and power within a particular setting. Gender analysis facilitates the creation of solutions that target gender disparities and cater to the distinct needs of both genders.[4]

To identify and address gender inequalities, gender analysis aims to:

[4] For interesting discussions on these distinctions in IR, see, Kumar et al. (2001), Brittain (2003), Romaniuk and Wasylciw (2010), Romaniuk (2012), Vojdik (2014).

- Recognise that there are differences between and among men and women based on the unequal distribution of opportunities, resources, constraints, and power;
- Ensure that the distinct needs of men and women are identified and taken into consideration at every stage of the policy cycle;
- Acknowledge that policies, programmes, and projects may have differing effects on men and women.

A comprehensive gender analysis not only explains the status of contextual conditions based on gender but also explores the causes and effects of gender disparities on the target group; it helps policymakers comprehend gender inequalities in a given context or sector (Schob & LeBrun, 2019). Examining the root causes of discrimination and gender inequality can aid in setting pertinent and focused goals and actions to abolish gender inequality. Therefore, gender analysis lays the groundwork to ensure that the needs of both men and women are adequately satisfied, thereby enhancing the gender responsiveness of laws and policies (EIGE, 2019).

The impacts of violent conflict on women

The UN Platform for Action (UN, 1995) supports the notion that violent conflict particularly impacts women and girls due to their sex, gender, and associated social status. During conflict, women encounter various challenges, including forced displacement from their homes, property loss, poverty, family separation, and disintegration, as well as victimisation by terrorism, torture, involuntary disappearance, sexual slavery, rape, and abuse. The fact that they play crucial roles in the family system makes them tactical targets of particular significance during crisis situations (Seifert, 1993). The long-term social, economic, and psychologically traumatising repercussions of violence, armed conflict, and war exacerbate these gender-specific effects (UN, 1995).

Modern warfare has severely damaged the lives and dignity of women and girls, as well as the health and educational systems vital to the survival of families and communities. UNFPA (2001) adds that war significantly impacts women's reproductive health issues, rendering them more vulnerable than men due to the pervasiveness of intentional discrimination and gender-based violence in these environments. Conflict makes it difficult to ensure the safety of women and girls as a result of gender-specific risks. Women in conflict and post-conflict settings are a priority demographic; however, this has led to gaps in the design and delivery of support and protection (UNFPA, 2001). Buvé et. al. (2002) report that people are becoming embroiled in a destructive cycle of HIV-related poverty in many regions of Africa. Gender largely determines who is most likely to contract STIs, such as HIV/AIDS.

The rate of new infections rises with armed conflict in all impacted populations, but women and girls are disproportionately more likely to contract the disease than men and boys. According to UNFPA 2008, teenage girls are four times more likely to contract HIV than teenage boys. Risks that have disproportionately affected women and girls include rape, high-risk behaviours, the inability to negotiate safe sex, and sexual exploitation. About 80% of refugees and internally displaced people globally are women and girls, while some women are living in extreme poverty (AU, 2006).

Prior to the early 2000s, rape was not considered a violation of international humanitarian law and was typically downplayed as an unpleasant but unavoidable aspect of war (Brownmiller 1975). Prostitution, forced pregnancy, mutilation of sexual organs, forced oral sex, rape, and other forms of sexual violence serve as an extension of warfare during times of armed conflict (Wilbers, 1994). However, women's activists have repeatedly advocated for the understanding of rape as a deliberate weapon of war, aimed at terrorising civilians, undermining the perceived enemy's morale, and driving them from the battlefield (McKay, 2006). Siefert (1993) argues that rape might be considered the greatest symbolic humiliation of the male opponent because it is a sexual manifestation of violence and a feature of excessive torture. For instance, Tutsi women who survived the Rwandan genocide assert that the perpetrators committed acts of rape and sexual mutilation with the aim of eradicating the Tutsi, rather than serving as an accessory to the slaughter (HRW, 1996).

According to El-Bushra and Lopez (1994), women in armed conflict areas constantly face the risk of intentional or unintentional attacks. Whether they are working in their fields, searching for food, water, or fuel, selling produce by the side of the road, or participating in communal activities, they face the risk of attack or becoming caught in the crossfire. Since women in Africa produce 80% of the continent's food, they are more likely to suffer injuries from land mines during or after armed conflict. As a result, they become incapable of working in the fields (Ashford & Huet-Vaughn, 1997). The tracing of the gendered impact of violent conflicts on women provides a background to the next section on how the prevalence of coups and terrorism in the Sahel leaves women worse off than men.

A gendered analysis of coups and terrorism in Nigeria and Burkina Faso

Gendered impact of terrorism in Nigeria

The whole population in Nigeria feels the effects of the Boko Haram insurgency, but this section focuses on how it affects women and girls. In addition to serving as reward wives and suicide bombers, women are vulnerable to sexual and gender-based violence, as well as intimate partner violence.

Kidnap victims, 'reward wives' and suicide bombers

Existing patriarchal norms in the region contribute to the weaponisation of women as targets in war. Boko Haram insurgents frequently use women as weapons, either as kidnapping victims or as suicide bombers, to attract the attention of the government (Bloom & Matfess, 2016). They impose stringent restrictions on women, limit their access to formal education and their reproductive health, and push for women to focus on Islamic education instead. Olaitan (2018) argues that women in Northern Nigeria often face exclusion from public spheres due to restrictive patriarchal norms, poverty, corruption, early marriage, and other factors.

Boko Haram uses the kidnapping of women and girls for practical and political reasons, including to express disapproval at the detention of female members and certain leaders' relatives (Bloom & Matfess, 2016). The most famous of these kidnappings was the 2014 kidnapping of over 200 schoolgirls in Chibok. To achieve their goal, they abducted girls from various religious sects with the intention of causing harm to communities that did not align with their beliefs. They gifted these kidnapped women and girls to their members as 'wives'—a form of reward. The agency of women in the face of the Boko Haram Insurgency is nonexistent, as they do not acknowledge women's power and agency. Therefore, the terrorists either use the entrapped women as suicide bombers or forcefully marry them.

Displacement from homes

ICG (2016) notes that the Boko Haram insurgency has drastically altered the lives of thousands of women and girls, frequently forcing them into new responsibilities outside the home either voluntarily or against their will. The vast majority of the estimated 1.8 million internally displaced persons are women, despite the relatively higher number of male deaths. The gendered consequences of the insurgency stem from the significant debate surrounding women's status in the North-East, which explains why Boko Haram has specifically targeted women (Olaitan, 2018).

Worsened living conditions

The consequences that women suffer are not just the doing of the insurgents alone; the counter-terrorist activities of the government have also negatively impacted women. According to the Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack (GCPEA, 2022), Boko Haram bombings, the military's prosecution of suspects, and its policy of clearing contested areas have forced more than a million women and girls to flee their homes. Hundreds of thousands of girls, living in government facilities with inadequate welfare services and healthcare facilities, are vulnerable to sexual and gender-based violence. Additionally, women are now entirely responsible for the safety and financial stability

of their families after being separated from their husbands and sons who were either conscripted by force, killed by Boko Haram, or detained by security authorities (GCPEA, 2022).

Psychological element

Ali et al. (2018) report that numerous women and children have experienced psychological trauma due to the negative actions of Boko Haram, the military, police, and civilian JTF. Many women and children have witnessed the deaths of their relatives and the destruction of their homes and communities, leaving them either widowed or orphaned. Shehu Mohammed (2018) revealed that the Boko Haram conflict has left behind a significant number of widows and orphans. He argues that women and children make up 60% of all those living in the IDPs created because of the Boko Haram insurgency.

Increased rate of Intimate partner violence

Mobayode-Ekhator et al. (2022) carried out a study to measure the increased or otherwise rate of intimate partner violence in Boko Haram affected regions in Nigeria. They narrate that when the insurgency started in 2013, the national rate of intimate partner violence (IPV) decreased from 18 to 16 percent. Nevertheless, this development was not uniform, with rising IPV prevalence rates in the North East (the hotspot of the insurgency). They argue that the concentration of the insurgency in north-eastern Nigeria could potentially link to the increased rates of IPV. During the insurgeDuring the insurgency, the percentage of women reporting controlling and abusive behaviour from their partners increased in the region affected by the insurgency. erienced the most significant increase, with women reporting controlling behaviours from their husbands or partners increasing from 60% to 70%.

In addition, women's ability to make independent decisions about their reproductive health decreased in afflicted regions (6 percent vs. no significant difference in non-affected areas). While a greater number of women report having autonomy over major household purchases in both areas, the non-conflict areas saw more growth in the proportion of women with authority over major household purchases than the afflicted areas. The above study shows that women's susceptibility to IPV increases when there is violent conflict, and their ability to make autonomous decisions about their bodies or households decreases. This susceptibility to IPV and loss of autonomy exacerbates the risks they face due to violent conflicts, frequently compounding the broader repercussions that the entire population faces.

Impact on girls' education

GCPEA (2018) reports that the insurgency has led to increased attacks on schools, educational facilities, and assaults on female students, as evident in the numerous kidnappings. They observe that the abduction of schoolgirls or their use as reward wives does not mark the end of the situation; even after their release, they continue to experience a variety of negative traumas. Attacks on educational facilities have had a cascading effect, leading to dire consequences for the possibility of girls continuing their education. These consequences include early marriage, pregnancy, stigma attached to sexual abuse, and loss of education. These attacks often exacerbate pre-existing instances of gender discrimination and harmful behaviour that negatively impact girls and women. Boko Haram's deliberate attacks on educational institutions and kidnappings of schoolgirls have harmed girls' access to education. Many female students recount that an attack on their institution forced them to either completely halt or suspend their education (GCPEA, 2018).

Increased rate of child marriage

Civil society organisations (CSOs), including women's rights advocates in Nigeria, have voiced the belief that instability has led to a surge in child and early marriage rates in the northeast. With an estimated 43% of girls getting married before becoming 18 and 17% before turning 15, Nigeria has one of the highest rates of child marriage in the world even before the conflict started. GirlsnotBrides (2018) ranked Nigeria 11th in the world for the frequency of child marriage. The Location significantly influences the frequency of child marriage, with just 10% of girls in southern Nigeria marrying before turning 18, compared to 76% of girls in northern Niger. The trend of young females marrying is further accelerated by attacks on schools, which result in the dropout or expulsion of numerous girls. Studies regularly show that the likelihood of a girl marrying at a young age is substantially increased by the act of dropping out of school, even for brief periods (UNFPA, 2012).

Gendered impact of coups in Burkina Faso

According to Zuva and Ojo (2023), people assume that men bear the most brunt because they are more likely to plan coups, lead military forces, and hold governmental positions. However, both men and women experience the consequences of these coups in different ways, with women bearing an unfair share of the burden. They note that women bear an unfair share of the burden, facing unique challenges in the areas of healthcare, economy, education, social welfare, and security. Acho (2024) notes that beyond the immediate political changes they bring about, coups have far-reaching effects on women and girls.

Restricted access

In Burkina Faso, 50% of boys and only 39% of girls finish high school education. This restricted access to education diminishes women's chances of participating in the economy and sustains poverty cycles. The case of Nigeria is bolstered by the fact that girls who drop out of school are more likely to be coerced into early marriages, which puts them at risk of sexual assault (Zuva & Ojo, 2023). As a method of surviving, they might also consent to transactional sex. This exacerbates the substantial gender disparity, denying girls equal chances for academic and financial success as their peers.

Economic impacts

During times of political instability, the economy takes a huge hit, with most foreign investments leaving the country and small businesses closing (ADB, 2009). As the primary care provider in households, women frequently experience the greatest amount of insecurity since they are expected to care for the family even in the face of hostile circumstances and unstable economic conditions, despite the difficulties posed by increased levels of insecurity. Economic upheavals accompanying coups disproportionately affect women, particularly those employed in informal industries. Economic downturns following coups also severely impact women's livelihoods. Economic instability causes income loss and higher rates of poverty because many women work in small-scale enterprises and the unorganised sector (Acho, 2024).

War targets, displaced persons, abuse victims

Following the coup in 2022, a significant majority of the IDPs and refugees in Burkina Faso were women and girls (Acho, 2024). Girls under the age of 14 accounted for 51% of the IDPs. Women and girls become easy targets in the tumultuous combat environment (Keita, 2023). Coups raise the possibility of SGBV because they seriously destabilise institutions related to security and law enforcement. During these times, there is an increase in cases of sexual assault, intimate partner violence, teenage pregnancies, and sexually transmitted infections.

Burkina Faso's coup in 2022 made already-existing fears worse, further intensifying violence against women, especially in places impacted by the conflict. Amidst the commotion, there were more allegations of domestic abuse and sexual violence, leading to a surge in gender-based violence. The coup also shifted government attention away from social concerns, putting initiatives for women's rights on hold (Acho, 2024). Human trafficking and other forms of exploitation particularly target women and girls uprooted by coups.

Widened gender inequalities

Coups frequently exacerbate already-existing gender disparities by bolstering patriarchal systems that disadvantage women and girls. Instability exacerbates vulnerabilities by restricting women's access to basic services like healthcare and education. Coups force schools and other educational institutions to cease operations, leading to their closure. Unlike their male counterparts, girls experience a greater impact and are unable to complete their education. In Burkina Faso, gender disparity is evident in all aspects, with women consistently perceived as inferior to men (Acho, 2024). Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) widely acknowledge assets, employment, education, access to credit, and basic utilities. Zuva and Ojo (2023) assert that women's vulnerability intensifies due to their inability to secure employment and financial resources in an already challenging environment, even before the coup.

Psychological element

Coups have significant psychological effects on women and girls, as explained in the case of Nigeria. Survivors experience stigma, mental health problems, and physical and psychological trauma. The possibility of future coups is a persistent source of worry for women and children. The stigma associated with experiencing multiple coups perpetuates a persistent fear of future coups (UNSDG, 2024). Political unrest in Burkina Faso has put pressure on the healthcare system, making it challenging for women to get the essential maternity and reproductive health care (World Health Organization, WHO, 2023). Zuva and Ojo (2023) assert that the tumultuous landscape of conflict and political instability often muffles women's voices, concealing their struggles beneath power struggles and violence. Sadly, coups and crises have become the norm in the African context, often ignoring the gendered implications that impact women's agency and rights.

General reflection

The Boko Haram insurgency has disproportionately impacted women in Nigeria for various reasons. The prevalence of terrorist activities leaves them more susceptible to issues such as IPV, displacement from homes, lack of access to reproductive health, an increase in child marriages, an increase in sexual and gender-based violence, being used as suicide bombers, and rewarding wives. Like Nigeria, the coup-induced instability in Burkina Faso has exposed women to increased threats. The closure of educational institutions has exposed young girls to sexual assault and early marriages. The worsening economic conditions force women to shoulder household burdens, leading to a

widening gender gap, an increase in sexual and gender-based violence, and psychological trauma resulting from displacement from their homes and communities.

Conclusion

The prevalence of coups and terrorism in the Sahel raises many questions about the human security concerns and other devastating consequences they have. As discussed, the Boko Haram insurgency in Nigeria has resulted in the displacement of millions of people from their homes, and the ongoing insecurity has claimed thousands of lives over the years. Often, the major consequence that receives the most attention is the increased insecurity and instability that this violence causes.

Instability forms the base of most dire consequences that affect a region; however, it is not everything. Amid the insecurity, a specific group is more susceptible to the dangers that arise. Different policies and studies, notably the Beijing Platform for Action, highlight that women and girls suffer the consequences of violent conflict more than men. This paper aimed to validate this notion in the context of the increasing violence in the Sahel region. Using a qualitative methodology and a thematic framework, this paper interrogated the gendered implication of coups and terrorism in the Sahel. The paper concentrated on the disproportionate impacts of war and violence on women, using Nigeria and Burkina Faso as case studies. The paper adopted a feminist perspective on violence to guide its analysis, underscoring the significant impact of violent conflict on women's rights.

The paper shows that the coups in Burkina Faso have a differential impact on women, as they bear an unfair share of the unique challenges. In Nigeria, where the insurgency continues, women make up the highest number of internally displaced persons; they are forced to take charge of the household; girls are forced to drop out of school; and there is an increase in early childhood marriage. Furthermore, there is a surge in intimate partner violence, as well as sexual and gender-based violence, which significantly impacts women's reproductive health. The findings from the paper show that there is a gender differential impact of the coup in Burkina Faso and the Boko Haram Insurgency in Nigeria, which leaves women worse off. In these regions, violence erodes the political, socio-economic, and reproductive rights of women, leading to a holistic regression in their rights.

The paper emphasised that any efforts to improve the situation in the Sahel region must recognise the precarious position women find themselves in during conflict situations. The paper urges the Economic Community of West African States—the apex organisation in West Africa—to adopt a gender-responsive approach to resolving the different conflicts that are plaguing the region. This approach will address the unique consequences that women face to ensure a holistic and sustainable resolution to the conflict.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing or financial interests in the production and publication of this study. All disclosed information is correct to the authors' knowledge.

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The transformation of Africa into a 'glocal terrorist hub': 3D jihad between narco-terror, maritime piracy, and sexual slavery[1]

Ilas Touazi[2]

Abstract:

Transnational terrorism with a jihadist focus has always been fed by both internal and external factors. This is why the African branches of Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State are able to adapt to local conditions, which has effects that go far beyond national borders. In so doing, Africa has become a 'glocal terrorist hub', undergoing a process of trans-nationalisation between the local and the global, with implications for regional security. The study frames itself against this backdrop, employing a dual 'bottom-up' and 'top-down' analysis to examine the operational strategies of terrorist groups and their doctrinal underpinnings. These strategies form a three-dimensional jihad, encompassing narco-terrorism, maritime piracy, sexual slavery, and gender-based violence as terror strategies. Therefore, counter-terrorism policies in Africa, already based on hard measures, need to focus increasingly on soft mechanisms to prevent and counter radicalisation and violent extremism, strengthened on the one hand by sustainable security architectures and on the other by integrated approaches to anti-terrorism cooperation at national, regional, and international levels.

Keywords:

Africa; 'global jihad hub'; maritime piracy; narco-terror; nikah jihad; sexual terrorism; counter-terrorism.

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Introduction

Groups affiliated with al-Qaeda and the Islamic State in Africa, particularly Boko Haram and al-Shabaab, make extensive use of conflicts, crises, state collapses, and international geopolitical upheavals to spread their constantly evolving globalised extremist ideology (International Crisis Group, ICG, 2016). Since then, Islamic terrorist networks in the African theatre have, on the one hand, instrumentalised the COVID-19 pandemic with opportunistic propagandist rhetoric, portraying it as a 'soldier of the Caliphate' and a divine punishment against the enemies of Allah (Lippiello, 2022). On the other hand, the jihadists consider the Russian war against Ukraine since 2022 to be a conflict between 'nations of unbelievers', giving them moral permission to join either side to serve the cause of jihad (Brzuszkiewicz, 2022). Similarly, the Hamas attack on Israel in October 2023 had a domino effect, causing tremors across the Horn of Africa and boosting the Al-Shabaab Islamists in Somalia (de Waal, 2023). This is evident in the increasing piracy in the Indian Ocean and Gulf of Aden, leading to a crisis in the Red Sea. Iranian-supported Houthi rebels from Yemen have launched multiple attacks on Israeli-linked ships (AFP & Le marin, 2024).

According to the Global Terrorism Index 2024 (GTI), the core of terrorism is in Africa, specifically the central Sahel region of Sub-Saharan Africa, where violent conflict remains the primary engine of terrorism, accounting for 90% of assaults and 98% of casualties in 2023 (Institute for Economics & Peace, IEP, 2024). The study on Africa's transformation into a glocal terrorist hotspot should be viewed through this lens, with an overview of jihadism segmented into three overlapping dimensions: narco-terrorism, maritime piracy, and sexual slavery.

The analysis, which is inherently interdisciplinary, is reinforced by research in security studies, religious thinking, political science, and international relations. Open source research tools are designed for raw data collection and analysis as part of the study of the African jihadist phenomena. Open Source Information (OSIF) gathers data primarily from widely distributed generic sources, including newspapers, books, magazines, general daily reports, and online Internet searches for statistics, data, articles, studies, and reports (Munteanu, 2019).

The following questions guide this study as it tackles the issues mentioned above: How has multidimensional Jihadism, including narco-terror, maritime piracy, and sexual slavery, transformed Africa into a 'Glocal Terrorist Hub' that threatens regional security? The following sub-questions complement this core question.

- *How has the interaction between endogenous and exogenous factors led to the spread of al-Qaeda and the Islamic State affiliates in Africa as the main actors of transnational jihadist terror?*

- *How is the hybridisation process of African jihadist threats articulated around a triptych of 'narco-jihadism', 'sea jihad', and 'nikah jihad'*[3] *('sexual jihad)?*
- *What are the primary African sustainable counter-terrorism strategies that aim to address global issues such as counter-piracy and 'conflict-related sexual violence' (CRSV)?*

Given the current international situation of the post-October 7, 2023, Hamas-Israel war, the analytical thread will be primarily directed by the following overarching assumptions. Firstly, the transformation of Africa into a hub of global terrorism does not appear to be the unequivocal result of religion, with its ideological and theological underpinnings, but rather of a combination of endogenous and exogenous factors as the main incubators of African franchises affiliated with Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State. Secondly, the African jihadist governance model is distinguished by a two-pronged process of hybridisation and transnationalisation buried in a triptych of 'narco-terrorism', 'naval piracy', and 'nikah jihad', which reflect the division activities of jihadist actors. This has resulted in integrated cooperation in terms of sustainable counter-terrorism and preventing violent extremism at regional and international levels.

The study of Africa's transformation into a 'Glocal Terrorist Hub' is orientated toward a 'mixed analytical approach' methodology. On the one hand, it relies on a constructive hermetic hybrid model of homogeneity versus heterogeneity, and on the other, it consolidates within a 'bottom-up' structure that begins at the 'local' level and progresses to the 'global' level of the phenomenon; this 'top-down' approach (Guidère, 2008) thus explains the internal and external variables of the spread of African jihadist hotspots.

The article proceeds in three parts. The first part focuses on how Africa has evolved into a 'Glocal Terrorist Hub' through al-Qaeda and Islamic State branches, examining multifaceted ideological and theological underpinnings as well as both exogenous and endogenous factors. Then, it scrutinises the hybridisation of African jihadist threats, which are framed through 'narco-terrorism' networks, the 'sea jihad', a nexus between 'terror, piracy, and criminality' as the main activity of Al-Shabaab, and 'nikah jihad', which has evolved into a warfare strategy of Boko Haram. Finally, African sustainable counter-terrorism addresses solutions based on soft governance to counter and prevent violent extremism and deradicalisation through innovative approaches to jihadist groups, organised crime, regional counter-piracy, and sexual terrorism.

[3] In March 2013, the Saudi preacher Muhammad bin Abdul-Rahman Al-Arifi's Twitter account featured the term 'jihad al-nikah'. Al-Arifi is the *Imam* of the mosque at the Saudi Navy's King Fahad Naval Academy.

Africa's transformation into 'glocal terrorist hub': A multidimensional factors and actors

The current landscape of Islamist extremism in Africa illustrates the multifaceted nature of jihadist terror, particularly the spread of local and transnational asymmetric networks within Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State as major disruptors of regional and international security. Thus, ideological and theological underpinnings, along with an array of multidimensional endogenous and exogenous factors, serve as the main incubators of Jihadist warmongering, transforming the African continent into an epicentre for violent extremism and radicalisation (see Diagram 1 drawn up by the author).

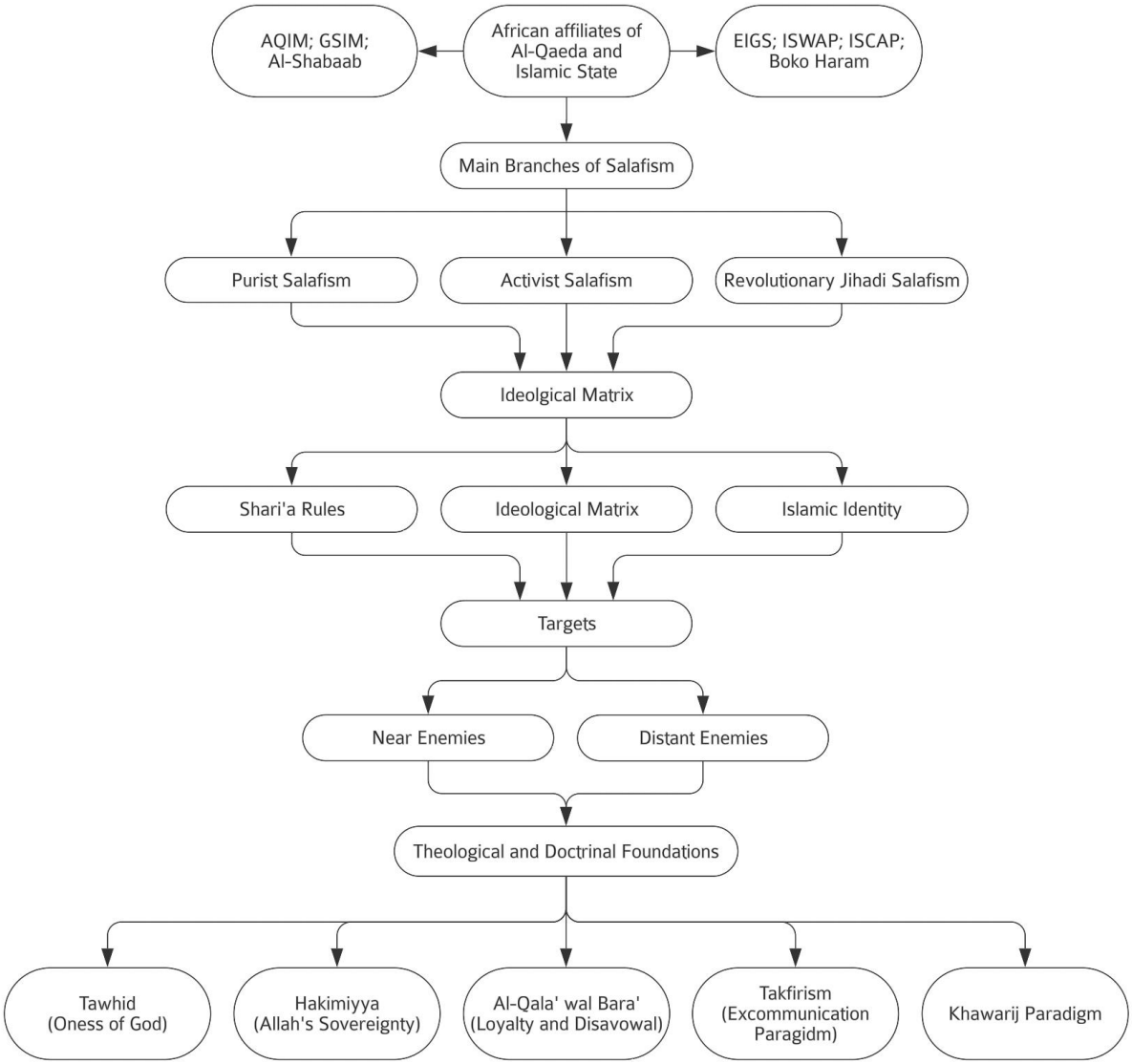

Figure 1: African Jihadist Salafism: Ideologies and features. Source: Author.

Transnational jihadist terror: Ideological matrix and theological foundations

The theological and ideological aspects of contemporary Islamic movements emerged in the social and political contexts of Islamic history through the religious thought of the Kharijis, Ibadis, Hanbalis, and Wahhabis (Khatab, 2011), with a view to establishing an Islamic order within the framework of the Shari'a, an inevitable step that would pave the way for the creation of a new golden age of the 'Islamic caliphate' (Turner, 2014). Indeed, jihadists advocate a narrow interpretation of Islam, limiting it to physical and material jihad and widely using it to justify struggle, violence, extremism, and terrorism, thereby establishing the sixth pillar of Islam (Esposito, 2004).

However, the Salafi-jihadist movement, comprising purists, activists, and revolutionary jihadists, shares a common set of religious beliefs. Four main ideas form the basis of these beliefs: 'tawed' and 'hakimiyya', which clarify Allah's legitimate authority; 'al-wala' wa-l-bara', demonstrating Muslims' loyalty to their fellow believers and their rejection of 'unbelievers'; and 'takfirism', symbolising the expulsion of Muslims from Islam for apostasy (Ranstorp, 2019). Consequently, the doctrine of 'martyrdom' subsumes the global precepts and beliefs of the post-modern Salafist jihad, namely Al-Qaeda, the Islamic State, and its regional affiliates, under a common religious ideology.

Meanwhile, the offensive jihad that supports today's global terrorist groups, like Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State (Shah, 2013), is a result of how Muslims have historically organised their political and military interactions with other countries based on their view of the world as having two parts: the center and the edges. This is why the Islamic classification of a place as 'home of war' (dar al-harb) or 'home of Islam' (dar al-Islam) (Abbès, 2003) is a result of this view. Thus, the trajectory of the global jihad clearly divides into distinct spheres: the 'internal jihad' and the 'external jihad' (Gunaratna, 2010), where the 'holy war' against 'infidels' specifically aims to expand the territory of Islam as a collective religious duty (Rabil, 2018). This is why Al-Qaeda and the Islamic state popularised the 'Near and Far Enemy' debate as a 'pragmatic jihadism strategy' in the early 1990s. However, the near enemy refers to local regimes in the Middle East and the Arab world, while western countries, specifically the United States (US) and the European Union (EU), represent the far enemy (Vidino, 2021). By demonising the other as the absolute enemy, the jihadist conception centralises the purifying jihad against other religions, particularly Jews and Christians, viewed as composite crusaders and satanic (Taguieff, 2017).

Accordingly, Islamist jihadist groups use a 'geopolitical triptych' model to destabilise enemy states, adopting a 'flying jump' strategy that focuses on creating a sanctuary, securing a 'grey zone', and choosing an area of action (Gaüzere, 2012). In fact, these are the same mechanisms used by African jihadist movements. The regional branches of Al-Qaeda and ISIS on the African continent have used the Gaza war between Israel and Hamas since October 2023 to urge supporters to carry out attacks on Israeli and

American interests, thus taking advantage of anti-Western sentiment to mobilise support for a globalised jihad with the risk of escalating into a regional conflict (Wilson Center, 2024).

However, jihadists are exploiting the galvanising cause of the 'far enemy' by positioning themselves locally, regionally, and transnationally as countering the 'crusader-Zionist' enemy, namely the US-Israel alliance. The Gaza war has also reinforced the old narrative of 'near enemy', condemning the so-called apostate Arab and Middle Eastern regimes that are complicit with western allies (Bacon, 2023).

The African jihadist threat dilemma: between rooted causes and multi-dimensional factors

The spread of transnational terrorism as a pathological condition reflects multiple independent variables, including a complex process of multidimensional internal and external factors. Hence, the root causes of terrorism constitute a specific form of connection between the social, economic, political, and demographic conditions underlying the acts of radicalisation and violent extremism (Assemblée Parlementaire de La Méditerranée, 2010). However, endogenous factors are the breeding ground of African terrorism; these include the spread of poverty, unemployment, famine, the tragic situation of children, the spread of serious diseases, as well as disparities in development caused by setbacks (Tiendrébéogo, 2020).

The COVID-19 epidemic significantly exacerbated poverty in Africa, which accounts for 54.8% of global poverty, according to the 2024 Africa Sustainable Development Report (ASDR) (African Development Bank, ADB, 2024). As a result, failing and fragile states have become breeding grounds for terrorism, especially in the Sahel-Saharan region where the absence of a state and the inability of security structures to effectively control vast geographical areas have led to a surge in jihadist activism (Piazza, 2008). Moreover, terrorism has propelled the peripheries of West Africa and the Sahel into the heart of a blurred geographical zone where the interactions between spatiality and networks overlap (Walther, 2010).

External influences, particularly in states with a colonial past, have led to African religious radicalisation, rejecting external models stemming from colonial domination (Pellerin, 2017). Sufism, a non-violent, non-political branch of Islam, has played a role in political and military resistance movements (Muedini, 2015). In so doing, post-independence Islamist movements have emerged as a defensive mechanism of the Muslim world against the neo-patrimonial governance and new colonialism of the Western powers (Raineri, 2017). Meanwhile, Salafi Wahhabism networks of Saudi-funded private schools, which primarily teach religious content through various NGOs and mosques in Mali and Mauritania, have contributed to the rise of terrorism (Steinberg, 2015). Indeed, strong Qatari Islamism has an interventionist agenda in the

North African and Sahel scenes due to the exceptional circumstances of the post-Arab spring in Libya and the destabilising effects of the Malian crises (Moniquet, 2013; Besenyő & Romaniuk, 2024).

Additionally, France's military and political actions in Libya in 2011 and Mali in 2013 to fix the problems of failing states in the region were characterised by a militaristic view of local problems that were systematically put in a global context and blamed on the radicalisation of Islam. However, interventionism is actually a cause of terrorism because it feeds the transnational nature of the threat of 'jihadism without borders', which is mainly represented by Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State (Pérouse de Montclos, 2019).

'Glocal' affiliates of Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State in Africa: New actors of insecurity

Specific geographical and geopolitical areas and contexts link African terrorism, making jihadists identifiable territorial actors with distinct spatial trajectories, in a clear intersect between geographical location, identity, and political effects (Morgado, 2023). On the one hand, geographical proximity within jihadists' networks explains the expansion of transnational jihadism (Bahgat, 2013). On the other hand, the jihadist geopolitical perception consists of classifying and ordering the territories, with an operational process of legitimisation, preparation, and action, into three realms: 'hostile zones', where attacks are to be carried out, and 'safe zones', where plans for the attacks can be made. In addition, there are 'shatter belt' regions that are legitimate priorities for conquest (Hobbs, 2005).

Whereas, the cyclical nature of African terrorism has evolved from the fourth to the fifth wave as the constitutive element of globalisation (Czornik, 2022), within a 'glocal' strategy that illustrates the new characteristics of today's jihadist militancy, wherein local and regional Al-Qaeda and Islamic state affiliates predominantly proliferate (O'Farrell, 2024). Consequently, the threat posed by foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) in Africa's Sahel-Sahara region has escalated due to their relocation following the collapse of the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq (ISIS) Caliphate. Nevertheless, the African Centre for the Study and Research on Terrorism (ACSRT). estimated that there were more than 5,000 FTFs in the Sahel in 2022, representing a major challenge for national and regional security (ACSRT, 2022).

However, the spread of African jihadism reflects the levels of articulation between local, regional, and then global inspirations (Guidère, 2008). In 2006, the North African jihadist insurgency integrated its agenda with that of Al-Qaeda, adopting a continuous internationalisation strategy under the name 'Al-Qaeda Organisation in the Country of the Islamic Maghreb', or 'AQIM' (SPINOZA, 2011). Indeed, the local franchises of AQ and IS in Africa combine modes of global jihadist governance with localised realities under a process of 'transnationalisation'. This, in turn, is characterised by a fractured

system of alliances and rivalries, notably over the interpretation of Islam and the legitimate means of radical political and religious change, as well as the sharing of natural resources (Cold-Ravnkilde, 2022). Accordingly, the Sahel region of West Africa became the new hotspot for the escalation of jihadist conflicts, specifically the local branch of the Islamic State in the Great Sahara (ISGS) and the Group to Support Islam and Muslims (GSIM), an alliance of groups affiliated with Al-Qaeda (Nsaibia & Weiss, 2020; see Besenyő & Romaniuk, 2024; Romaniuk et al., 2024).

Meanwhile, Islamic State militant groups have experienced numerous transformations, including splits, alliances, and a shift in allegiance to the global ISIS. This shows that Islamist militant groups are consolidating their presence (Suleiman, 2022) in North Africa among new 'wilayats' or 'provinces' of the Islamic State in Algeria, Libya, Algeria, and Sinai (Zelin, 2024). Furthermore, geographically asymmetrical networks of Islamic states pose a diffuse challenge (European External Action Service, EEAS, 2023), significantly impacting the security and political landscape, particularly with the emergence of new affiliates in Sub-Saharan Africa, which includes numerous provinces in the Great Sahara, Sahel, West Africa, and Central Africa (Warner et al., 2022).

The hybridisation of African jihadist threats: A triptych between 'narco-terrorism', 'naval piracy', and 'nikah jihad'

Africa's jihadist nebulas shape an arc of multi-dimensional features under a new form of international subdivision of terrorist activities, essentially based on a dual model of hybridisation and transnationalisation driven by the local franchises of Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State. Thus, post-modern pragmatic terrorism forms a terror-crime nexus spectrum, characterised by a cross-triptych between 'narco-terrorism', 'naval piracy', and 'nikah jihad' (see Diagram 2 drawn up by the author).

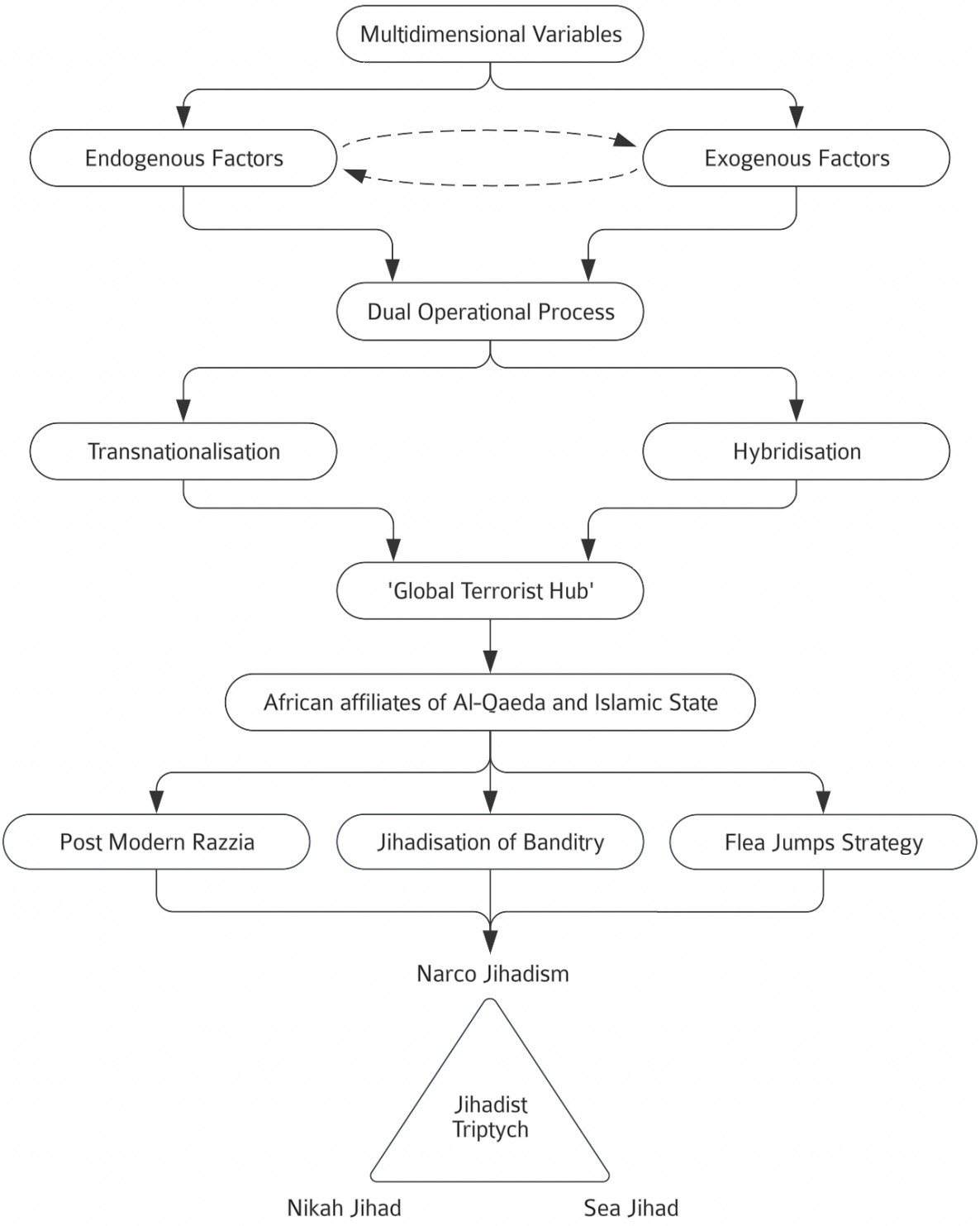

Figure 2: African jihadist threats triptych. Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State African affiliates: A hybrid model between 'Narco-jihadism' and post-modern 'Razzia' Source: Author.

Globalisation is facilitating stronger linkages between global criminal networks and local criminal groups through transnational organised crime (TOC), thus fueling armed groups' expansion in Africa (Africa Center for Strategic Studies, n.d.). According to the

Organized Crime Index for Africa 2023, transnational crime increased steadily from 0.08 points to 5.25 points between 2019 and 2023, mainly attributable to the post-pandemic period of COVID-19. Non-state actors, specifically jihadist groups, continued to participate in transnational crime activities, with a peak in East, West, and Southern Africa. Compared to other drug markets, the cocaine trade on the continent has seen the largest increase since 2019 (+1.12) (ENACT, 2023).

Narco-Jihadists are active in the African continent, with hierarchical cells that are autonomous but subject to a pyramidal model, a marked use of violence, and a strong political base. Indeed, jihadism has had a definite influence on the expansion of drug trafficking, from which it draws much of its funding. On the one hand, Islamist groups often establish a close relationship with drug traffickers, providing them with military support in the form of armed escorts for drug convoys. This is evident through the adoption by jihadists operating in Libya and by Boko Haram of tramadol as a drug for combatants (Oumarou, n.d.).

Simultaneously, Captagon has become the new 'drug of Jihad', used by African terror organisations and supported by 'narco-states' (Lahav, 2023). Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) profits from the connections between terrorism and drug trafficking, particularly the transportation of cocaine from West and North Africa to Latin America and Europe (Minteh, 2013). Since then, the Group to Support Islam and Muslims (GSIM) has also been involved in drug trafficking, smuggling, and arms trafficking, as well as imposing a 'tax' in exchange for protection, which have become key elements of its transnational criminal activities (Lounnas, 2018).

Indeed, Africa is becoming a hub for the international heroin trade networks, with an integrated 'regional criminal economy', mainly developed in the East African region, enmeshed in a variety of transnational trafficking cartels and criminal governance structures. The 'southern route' connects East and southern Africa to countries in Asia, Africa, Europe, and, to a limited extent, North America (Shaw, 2018). According to the UNODC World Drug Report 2023, cocaine trafficking remains crucial in Africa, particularly in West Africa, with North Africa serving as an intersection for inter-regional smuggling of cannabis resin and cannabis (ONUDC, 2023). However, African jihadist groups' businesses have diversified narcotics and smuggling activities to include illegal taxation of natural resources, which accounts for 38% of financing, drugs (28%), seizures and looting (26%), and money extorted from kidnappers for ransom (3%) (Nellemann, 2018).

Narco-jihadism has its roots in the trans-Saharan caravan trade's historical traditions; it was founded on a protection economy through 'razzias', but it persisted during colonial and post-colonial periods before being taken over by the criminal economy and jihadists. Based on the rapid and violent interception of cargo, narco-jihadism represents a new form of post-modern militarised 'razzia' that is widespread throughout the Sahel countries. It redistributes profits to strengthen social and tribal ties, mirroring

the old razzias (The International Crisis Group, 2018). Jihadist governance thus reflects an evolving process from small bands towards proto-state actors and operates under the 'business models' of competitive patron-client organisations (UNDP, 2022). However, the jihadist leaders of the Al-Qaeda factions in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and the Tuareg in the Sahel were key players in cigarette smuggling activities, particularly Mokhtar Belmokhtar, nicknamed 'Mr. Marlboro' (Le Monde, 2013). Thereby, the 'jihad of the cow' reflects the new cycle of jihadist violence in Africa. On the one hand, it has intensified the economic, political, and religious interweaving in pastoral areas. On the other hand, it has revived the conflictual dynamics around the ethnic references (Zanoletti, 2019) of the 'black jihad' in the Sahel, in particular the Peuls, within the Sahelian subsidiaries of Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State (Carayol, 2016).

Furthermore, the main features of African terrorism are the rise of the 'jihadisation of banditry', manifested primarily through the theft of livestock from pastoral communities and nomadic herders by the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (EIGS) group in north-east Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso (Rédaction Africanews & AFP, 2023). Terrorist groups in Africa, including ISIS in West Africa and Boko Haram, exploit environmental vulnerabilities for recruitment and expansion, firstly by exercising control over water resources, particularly in the Lake Chad basin, and secondly by targeting environmentally constrained regions, seizing water resources to restrict access to communities, and using them as weapons (Al Hosani, 2024).

The dangerous multi-cause nexus between extremist violence and environmental degradation has heightened complex security issues and humanitarian crises across Africa (Frimpong, 2020). As a result, the 2023 Ecological Threat Report (ETR) highlighted a significant correlation between the militarisation of jihadists and ecological threats, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA). This region has emerged as a hotspot for asymmetrical challenges, with climate change, terrorism, conflict, and transnational crime posing the highest risk (IEP, 2023).

Al-Shabaab and the Islamic State in Somalia: The nexus between 'naval piracy' and 'sea jihad

Despite the dynamic of rivalry and hostility between the Islamic State and Al-Qaida jihadist groups, their common characteristics are more striking than their differences: they share the same political and military credentials (Michael W. S., 2015). However, Al-Shabaab and the Islamic State have adopted an inherent strategy that focuses on a nexus between 'terror, piracy, and criminality' in the Somali province. Hence, Somali piracy and 'maritime terrorism' operate extensively in the Gulf of Aden, spanning the

Horn of Africa, which is a vital shipping lane connecting Asia and Europe, with more than 20,000 ships transiting the region each year (Salkar, 2020).[4]

Somali terrorist groups have adopted a comprehensive doctrinal model to acquire naval capabilities through maritime operations, thereby enhancing the pattern of 'land-based jihadism'. This is in line with Al-Qaeda's establishment of a'maritime jihad section' and the Islamic State's use of the sea to expand its geopolitical influence (Terrom, 2018). Thus, the Jihadists draw their inspiration from the Islamic historical past, when Muslim pirates organised and undertook naval expeditions, particularly in the Mediterranean, which was a haven for piracy activities and the only artery for maritime trade between East and West (Khalilieh, 2019). That's why Somalian jihadists consider the conquest of the sea lanes a religious duty and a vital instrument for asserting Islamic sovereignty over the sea, which constitutes a chessboard for projecting the universality of the Muslim Caliphate, thus justifying razzias under the banner of 'maritime jihad' (Valérian, 2022).

Indeed, 'sea jihad' (Sari, 2015) has created a maritime security deficit off the coast of Somalia and the Gulf of Aden. This has intensified the close ties between transnational risks, ranging from terrorism to piracy, with criminal flows reflecting the militarisation of economic and geopolitical stakes (Péron-Doise, 2016). As a result, the alliance between radical Islamist groups and pirates, who are well-armed and well-versed in the methods of boarding ships on the high seas, has transformed the Horn of Africa into a strategic region for international maritime traffic (Diop, 2010). From this perspective, radical Islamist groups and pirates are collaborating to amass finances, fighters, and weapons with the aim of conquering territory or hijacking ships, forming a type of 'businessman's network' (Ward, 2017). As a result, IS Somalia is collaborating with pirates, specifically Mohamed Garfanje's Hobyo-Haradhere piracy network, who have provided invaluable logistical support (Australian Government, 2022). However, the regional affiliates of Al-Qaeda and ISIS in Somalia have formed alliances with the Houthis in Yemen to disrupt international shipping in the waters of the Red Sea and Bab Al Mandeb, with the aim of exerting pressure on the international community to end Israel's war on Gaza.

To further this objective, the Al-Shabab militants in Sanaag have concluded an agreement with the pirates to provide them with protection in exchange for around 30% of the ransoms received, thereby increasing their sources of funding (Clayton, 2023). Since then, the Harakat al-Shabaab al-Mujaahidiin tax-collection machine operates under a double modus operandi, mixing 'mafia-style groups' and 'criminal networks' through its established and efficient 'taxation' apparatus. This system includes transportation (gadiid) taxes on trucks, goods (badeeco) taxes, and agricultural produce (dalag) taxes. While checkpoint taxation accounts for tens of millions of dollars for the militant group on an annual basis, Al-Shabaab also derives its income from other sources,

[4] Projecting power on the seas globally has been done for centuries, and it has clear economic and military benefits (Morgado, 2021).

including forced charitable contributions (zakat), direct extortion from businesses, kidnappings for ransom, and taxation of imports at the port of Mogadishu (Bahadur, 2022).

The post-war situation in Gaza has created a causal link between the Houthi attacks in the Red Sea and the resurgence of pirate attacks in the Indian Ocean, leading to a chaotic crisis of a globalised economy transiting through the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait and the Suez Canal. However, the jihadist orientation of a dual, interdependent geopolitical strategy remains consistent, extending from land to sea. The Al-Shabab group is indirectly supporting pirate groups in Somalia as part of this strategy. In mid-March 2024, the leader of the Houthi rebels, Abdul-Malik al-Houthi, announced his intention to extend his attacks to the Indian Ocean, in an area close to piracy zones (Makhlouf & Borer, 2024).

Similarly, since the Hamas attack on Gaza, the type of attack and the resources and capabilities used have intensified and diversified, with substantial weaponry and sophisticated means, as well as navigational skills based on speedboats and motherships (Massias, 2024). The International Maritime Bureau (IMB) reports that acts of maritime piracy off the coast of Somalia and in the Gulf of Guinea are on the rise, demonstrating a growing capability to target ships at long distances, as evidenced by the successful hijacking of a ship in December 2023 (Lamorena, 2024).

Boko Haram gender-based violence: A dualistic militarisation between sexual enslavement and 'nikah Jihad'

'Sexual terrorism' has become a top priority for violent extremist organisations (VEOs) due to the increased transnational activities of groups such as ISIS, Al-Shabaab, and Boko Haram. These groups use CRSV and human trafficking as tactics of jihadist warfare (Paulussen, 2021). On the one hand, sexual violence has emerged as the lethal weapon of Sunni fundamentalist supremacists, mainly directed against unbelievers and apostates classified as enemies. On the other hand, sexual enslavement has targeted exclusively women, children, and religious minorities, reflecting a certain ethno-sectarian hierarchy that undeniably reflects an archaic vision of hyper-masculinity designed exclusively to strengthen the bonds of solidarity between jihadist movements (Ahram, 2015).

Boko Haram has also used rape and sexual slavery as a strategy to draw in new members, promoting 'getting closer to God' through the sex slave trade and 'nikah jihad' (Esfandiari, 2015). The term 'nikah jihad' refers to the alleged practice of Sunni women offering themselves emotionally and physically in sexual comfort roles to fighters aiming to establish Islamic rule. However, 'nikah al-Mut'ah' (simply mut'ah or 'temporary marriage'), which was widely practiced in Shia communities during the early history of Islam, has deeply influenced the Islamic State (Grami, 2018). As a war strategy and an integral part of the political economy of the conflict, other forms of forced,

temporary, and early marriage and prostitution have revived and institutionalised this practice (OCHA, 2015). However, UNODC data from 2023 shows that non-state armed groups, such as Al-Qaeda and Islamic State affiliates, are involved in transnational crimes such as illegal financial flows (IFFs), smuggling of migrants (SOM), and trafficking in persons across borders in West Africa (UNODC, 2023).

'Gender-based violence' (GBV) has become an integral part of Boko Haram's asymmetric tactics in northeast Nigeria. This is primarily due to the exhaustion of its fighters and the loss of territory, which has led them to carry out targeted attacks on schools and feminine institutions with the aim of abducting and kidnapping women and young girls (Adeyanju, 2020). Rape, armed abduction, forced marriage, captivity, and abuse of women are vital components of the Boko Haram strategy. The group's gendered tactics consist of weaponising them as instruments and objects of war, such as sex slaves, human shields, and suicide bombers (Okoli, 2022). More significantly, gender in Boko Haram's ideology and culture has focused exclusively on the forced imposition of Shari'a law, facilitating gender-based violence through rigidly gendered ideological structures. Consequently, the insurgents view women, particularly Christian women, as legitimate targets, justifying their abduction and rape as a form of sexual 'jizya', an Islamic law-imposed tax on Christians (Zenn, 2014).

Meanwhile, Boko Haram views women as symbols of swords in its terror strategy; hence, it has used them in a dualistic operational process, partly by bargaining chips with government forces and by involving them in coordinated attacks to maintain a presence in urban areas (Bloom, 2016). More than 8 million civilians have experienced gender-based violence since the abduction of 250 Chibok female students in 2014 in Borno State. This violence has spread to Cameroon, Chad, Niger, and the Lake Chad region, leading to alliances with the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) (Charles Aniekwe, 2024). Between 2011 and 2018, 434 Boko Haram suicide bombers in the Lake Chad Basin were detected (Warner & Matfess, 2017). Since 2022, incidents of human trafficking and kidnapping perpetrated by Boko Haram, JNIM, and the Islamic State's Sahel Province (ISSP) have intensified in the Sahel, which has become a springboard for expansion into the coastal states of West Africa. Indeed, in 2023, the prevalence of kidnapping, forced recruitment, and kidnapping for ransom as a flexible source of income doubled. The Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project's data indicates that these VEOs are accountable for more than 80% of the 78 reported kidnappings in this region between 2022 and 2023 (GI-TOC, 2024).

African sustainable counter-terrorism: seeking solutions for global pathologies

Given that the jihadist threat is a chronic pathology with multidimensional consequences for African security, there is an absolute imperative to develop a sustained response based on soft governance to counter terrorism and prevent violent extremism and

radicalisation linked to narco-jihadism, maritime jihad, and sexual terrorism (see Diagram 3 drawn up by the author).

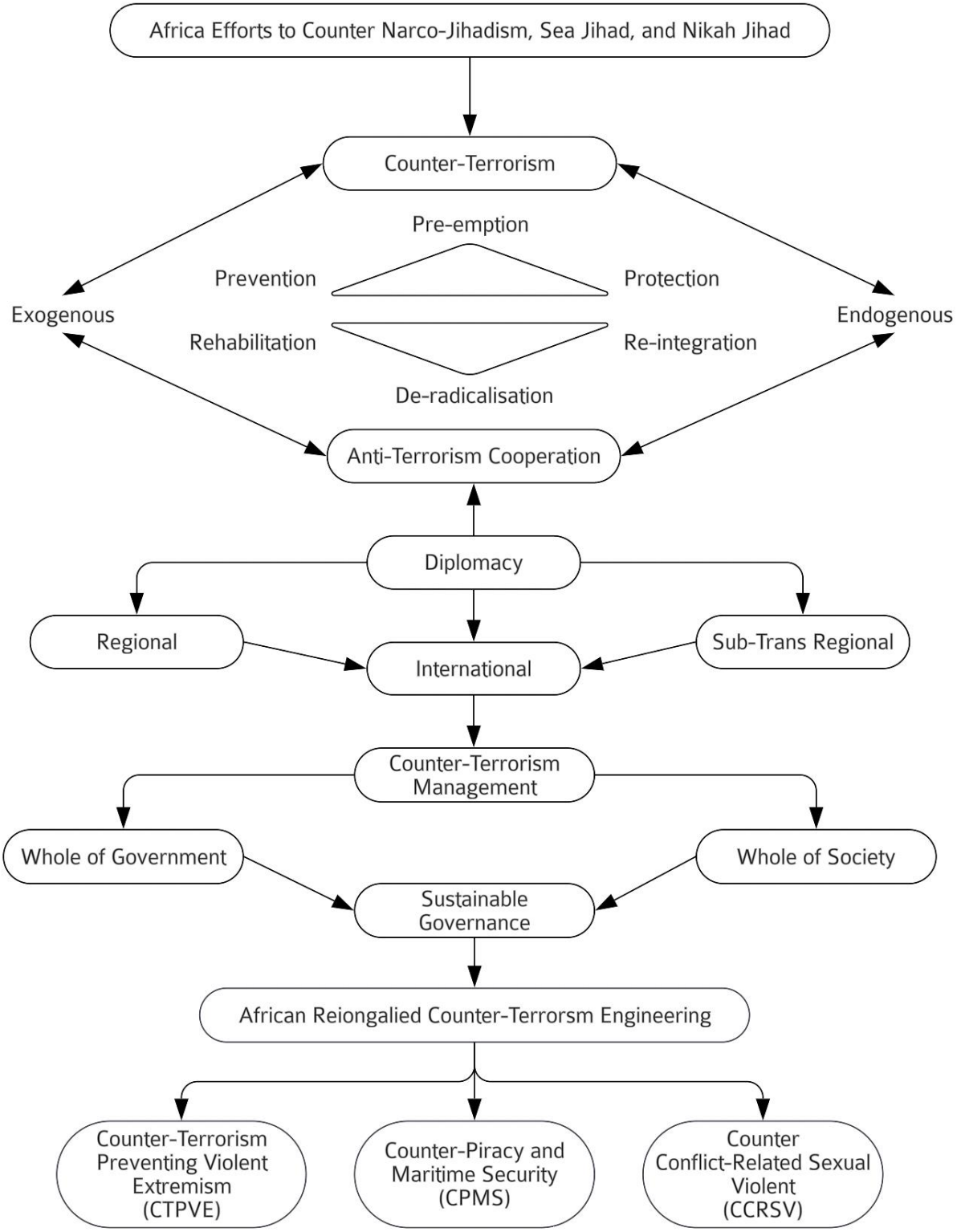

Figure 3: African efforts to counter Narco-Jihadism, Sea Jihad, and Nikah Jihad. Enhancing African regional governance and sustainable security architectures to counter 'narco-jihadism'. Source: Author.

In 1999, the African Union (AU) initiated its counter-transnational terrorism efforts by adopting the 'AU Convention on the Prevention and Combating of Terrorism' as a common legislative framework. An 'Additional Protocol' in 2004 enhanced this, defining the role of AU institutions responsible for implementing anti-terrorism instruments on regional and international levels. Since then, in 2010, the AU has appointed a Special Representative for Counter-Terrorism, and in 2011, the AU Assembly adopted the African Model Law on Counter-Terrorism to assist states in harmonising legislation on terrorism (UNOAU, 2015). The Assembly, Executive Council, and Pan-African Parliament are among the AU's institutions and organs in charge of countering terrorism (Ewi, 2006). Therefore, the 'AU Commission' and the 'Peace and Security Department' (PSD) solely have authority over the CT to strengthen regional mechanisms for monitoring the execution of counter-terrorism decisions.

The 'Peace and Security Council' (PSC) is in charge of harmonising and coordinating operations under the 'African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA)', which includes the 'Defense and Security Division' (DSD) and a counter-terrorism subcommittee. As a result, the 'African Centre for Study and Research on Terrorism' (ACSRT) emerged in 2004 to help AU member states build their counter-terrorism capacity by conducting research, analysis, and studies on terrorism, as well as maintaining a database for centralising, sharing, and evaluating information. Meanwhile, the AU police cooperation mechanism (AFRIPOL) intensified the operationalisation of the fight against 'criminal jihadists' (NKALWO NGOULA, 2016). On the one hand, the African Union police cooperation mechanism (AFRIPOL) maintains strong partnerships with African regional police chief organisations. On the other hand, it also collaborates with the Committee on Intelligence and Security Services in Africa (CISSA) (AFRIPOL, n.d.; Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit, GIZ, 2024) to counter transnational threats and prevent the territorial regression of criminal networks and terrorist organisations.

Africa has been particularly vulnerable to links with terrorist groups and organised crime. In response, the AU's strategy has focused on addressing the root causes of these interrelated and destabilising challenges (UNODC, n.d.). On the one hand, 'Regional Economic Communities' (RECs) are at the heart of the AU's anti-terrorism cooperation, primarily with the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the 'Lake Chad Basin Commission' (LCBC), and the 'Intergovernmental Authority on Development' (IGAD) within the 'Capacity Building Programme against Terrorism' (ICPAT) (Ayalew Demeke, 2014). However, the Southern African Development Community (SADC), with its regional counter-terrorism centre, is coordinating and

strengthening the response to terrorism (SADC, n.d.). On the other hand, the African Union has focused on 'soft measures' and non-binding policies to prevent and counter violent extremism (P/CVE), with democratisation, education, and mechanisms to prevent African youth from radicalisation (Abdelssami, 2019).

High-level consultations with various UN agencies, such as the UN Counter-Terrorism Committee (UN-CTC) and the UNODC Terrorism Prevention Branch (AU, 2014), govern cooperation at the international level. In line with Security Council Resolution 2195, Africa is actively addressing the connections between transnational organised crime and terrorism. This is being done in close collaboration with the Global Counter-Terrorism Forum (GCTF) and in coordination with UNICRI, specifically focusing on The Hague's best practices on these links (UNICRI, 2021). Since then, in 2023, UNODC and UNICRI launched a new project on the nexus between terrorism and organised crime in Africa, funded by the UN Peace and Development Trust Fund (UNPDTF), with scoping missions and the development of a technical assistance plan with key stakeholders and agencies involved in the fight against organised crime and terrorism in Algeria, Benin, Mali, and Togo, respectively (UNICRI, 2023).

For its part, the UNODC branch responsible for combating transnational organised crime is active as a sub-regional programme for East Africa (2016–2021). While AIRCOP aims to strengthen the capacity of international airports to detect and intercept high-risk passengers, including foreign terrorist fighters, illicit drugs, and other illicit commodities, UNODC's Law Enforcement, Organized Crime, and Anti-Money Laundering unit also operates in East Africa (UNODC, n.d.).

In the face of these problems, African policies need creative and innovative approaches within a sustainable counter-terrorism strategy, including institutional architecture, development, and social justice (Makinda, 2006). This is why 'citizen-centered governance', which was previously downgraded to approaches based on the Joint Multinational Force (JMMF), peacekeeping operations, and the Regional Strategy for Stabilization, Recovery, and Resilience (RS-SRR) (Eizenga & Gnanguênon, 2024), is the missing piece in African regionalised counter-terrorism engineering. Indeed, sustainable counter-terrorism, which is considered a comprehensive dynamic management that encompasses local, regional, national, and international levels, is the solution for African narcoterrorism (Haimes, 2004). This necessitates the integration of 'whole-of-government' and 'whole-of-society' approaches, as well as non-traditional governance with primarily non-kinetic and low-kinetic strategies that connect the prevention and countering of violent extremism (P/CVE), violent extremist organisations (VEOs), and counter-terrorism (CT) (Palacios, 2024).

Rethinking regional and global counter piracy and maritime security (CPMS)

The African Union Transitional Mission in Somalia (ATMIS), formerly known as the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM), has been actively working to defeat the jihadist Al-Shabaab since 2022. As a result, the Somali army is leading the charge in cooperation against terrorism with local clans and support from other regional countries (The International Crisis Group, 2023). There are also national and regional anti-piracy and maritime security operations (PM/CPMS) in the Horn of Africa (US Department of State, DoS, n.d.a). These include the EU Naval Force in Somalia, Operation Atalanta, conducted by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) as part of the Standing Naval Maritime Group, and Operation Ocean Shield, conducted by the Allied Task Force. However, the EU, AU, League of Arab States, and NATO coordinate trans-regional anti-piracy cooperation measures (World Bank, 2013). Meanwhile, on the international front, specialised institutions oversee anti-piracy operations in this region, with the International Maritime Bureau (IMB), the International Maritime Organization (IMO), and the Piracy Reporting Center playing key roles (*Atlas Magazine*, 2022).

In addition to these initiatives, UN Security Council Resolution 1851 formed the basis for the creation of the Contact Group on Piracy off the Coast of Somalia (CGPCS) in 2009 (US DoS, n.d.b). Established in 2012 in response to Security Council Resolution S/RES/1851, the Counter-Piracy Trust Fund serves as the focal point for international efforts to combat piracy off the coast of Somalia (Multi-Partner Trust Fund Office, 2024). In 2022, the Somali Police Force (SPF) Department of Coast Guard had a new, cutting-edge facility for counterpiracy and armed robbery along the Somali coastline, originally created by the United Nations (UN) and sponsored by the EU (The Maritime Executive, 2022).

With a view to countering piracy as a multidimensional threat, African efforts must preserve the seas from armed interference and allow free and safe transit in international waterways. Similarly, regional cooperation must expand the size and scope of the maritime information fusion centers and enhance maritime domain awareness (MDA) with subregional maritime rescue coordination centers (MRRC) in accordance with the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) (Blaine, 2024; Romaniuk & Kaunert, 2024). The 'root causes' of piracy in the Gulf of Guinea region of West and East Africa are widespread poverty, governmental failure, and the fallout from illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing.

These factors fuel the piracy epidemic. As a result, a regional and international 'collaborative approach' is the only way to tackle maritime insecurity and put an end to piracy (ADF, 2023). The international community's efforts to stop piracy in Africa have slowly changed from a military focus to a new set of concerns that started with 'top-down' and now include 'bottom-up' issues as well. These include building up people's skills as part of all-around cooperation (GUILFOYLE, 2010), which connects fighting piracy on land with protecting the seas and promoting regional growth (Winn, 2017).

An integrated approach to counter sexual terrorism and CRSV

Internationally, the criminal justice process has marginalised and placed victims of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) on the periphery. However, the efforts of international bodies and criminal tribunals, particularly the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR) and the International Criminal Court (ICC) (Mbazira, 2014), have profoundly changed this. On the other hand, Security Council Resolutions 2253 of December 17, 2015 (UNSC, 2015) and 2331 of December 20, 2016 (UNSC, 2016) have propelled the sexual terrorism of ISIS, Al-Shabaab, and Boko Haram to the forefront of the international agenda and strongly condemned it.

The AU's policy responses to persistent sexual violence are primarily based on the Solemn Declaration on Gender Equality in Africa (SDGEA), which is a protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa. Although the AU deals extensively with conflict-related rape, it does not recognise its use by jihadist groups as a strategic weapon. This is controversial because the AU treated rape and gender-based violence as a symptom of conflict, providing an inadequate response to the problem (Langeveldt, 2014). In this regard, the Women, Gender, and Youth Directorate (WGYD) is currently developing the AU framework for the elimination of violence against women and girls, as well as sexual violence in conflict situations. This framework is based on a 'rights-based approach' that emphasises prevention, advocacy, and mobilisation, in line with Agenda 2063 and Agenda 2030 on Sustainable Development Goals (AU, 2021).

The Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF) and countering violent extremism (CVE) efforts reinforce counter-insurgency (COIN). The Peace Restoration and Peacebuilding Assessment (RPBA), which frames gender as a cross-cutting theme and includes gender-based violence (OCHA, 2017), is filling gaps in the role of women in post-conflict peace reconstruction. Meanwhile, the Nigerian Operation Safe Corridor programme has implemented a de-radicalisation, rehabilitation, and reintegration (DRR) approach for former Boko Haram fighters and women victims of sexual violence (Ugwueze, 2022).

As part of the humanitarian approach in jihadist conflict zones, cooperation between the UN and the Nigerian government has made it possible to provide support for victims of kidnapping and violence by former Boko Haram captives. This support includes clinical care for rape victims and psychosocial support for the social and economic reintegration of victims of terrorism (OSRSGSVC, n.d.), which is part of a systematic and multidimensional programme in post-Boko Haram peace processes (Obisesan, 2023). The prosecution of acts of sexual and gender-based violence committed by terrorists must focus more on a victim-centered approach that serves both the victims and the state's counter-terrorism strategies. However, despite the African commitment to the UN strategy and the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA), which adopted

resolution A/RES/77/298, the impact of the resolutions in practice remains limited (Siampakou, 2023).

Conclusion

After scrutinising Africa's transformation into a 'glocal terrorist hub' through multi-dimensional jihadism, including narco-terrorism, maritime piracy, and sexual slavery, it is clear that a comprehensive interpretive understanding that focuses on a root-cause approach should be a high priority at the intellectual level and at the operational level of post-modern and sustainable counter-terrorism. On the one hand, religious fanaticism primarily stems from an archaic and extremist worldview that distinguishes between near and far enemies. Endogenous factors such as state failure, poverty, economic insecurity, and political instability, which are the founding principles of the jihadist matrix, partially fuel this phenomenon.

Exogenous factors, however, are significant determinants, notably the colonial past and foreign interventions, which are incubators for the proliferation of African jihadism. While local affiliates of Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State are rational actors taking advantage of globalisation to expand their sphere of influence and exploit the international situation to their advantage, particularly in the current context of the war in Gaza between Israel and Hamas since October 2023, there is a certain entente between Somali pirates, Al-Shabab, and the Houthis in Yemen.

The regional branches of Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State in Africa are charting an operational trajectory as part of a triptych of 'narco-terrorism', 'naval piracy', and 'nikah jihad'. At the same time, these jihadist groups have adopted a dual process of transnationalisation and hybridisation, indicating a very high degree of adaptability to changing circumstances. Furthermore, they have emerged as pragmatic players and business models in the highly specialised sector of internationalised terrorist action. The Group for Supporting Islam and Muslims focuses on narco-jihadism and banditry as a sort of post-modern razzia, while Al-Shabab and the Islamic State in Somalia have developed a triangular connection between jihadism, piracy, and organised crime under the banner of Jihad of the Sea. Meanwhile, Boko Haram and the Islamic State's affiliates in the Great Sahara and West African provinces have adopted the militarisation of sexual terrorism, kidnappings, and the exploitation of captive women under the guise of 'nikah jihad' as their primary war terror strategy.

Despite Africa's efforts to combat terrorism and prevent violent extremism, jihadism persists in its proliferation. Therefore, we must address the core causes of the jihadist problem, starting with a committed understanding, discrediting radicalised doctrines through early prevention, and increasing mobilisation through a moderate discourse and counter-ideology. At the operational level, it is essential to focus on innovative and

holistic approaches, but also on the collective commitment of all counter-terrorism actors and civil society. This is why partnership and multidimensional cooperation must be at the heart of African concrete responses. Conversely, by strengthening African legal, institutional, and regional cooperation within the AU's security architectures, sustainable solutions based on soft governance can effectively combat 'narco-jihadism'.

Ultimately, this ought to be framed by anti-terrorism diplomacy, including bilateral and multilateral coordination at the regional and international levels to CPMS, coupled with an overhaul of the fight against sexual terrorism and CRSV with new approaches focused on victims and human rights.

Conflict of interest

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

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The effects of strategic rivalries on non-rival neighbouring small states: Mauritania's political stability – shelter diplomacy to manage the Algeria-Morocco strategic rivalry [1]

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Abstract:

This research sheds light on the remarkable political stability that has prevailed for more than a decade in Mauritania, a Sahelian country that has notably not been affected by the spill over effects of military coups in the Sahel. In understanding Mauritania's political stability; evidenced by the country's first peaceful and constitutional transition of power in 2019 and the absence of any coups since 2009; the paper offers an explanation based on the impact of strategic rivalries on non-rival small states. Specifically, it examines how Mauritania, which has been subject to pressures from the Algeria-Morocco strategic rivalry, deflected these pressures and achieved political stability through shelter diplomacy. Since 2010, Mauritania has managed to secure shelter with France, elevating its relations with Paris to the highest level in their bilateral history. This is evidenced by hosting the G5 Sahel headquarters, engaging in very active summitry with Paris, hosting French soldiers, and chairing the AU summits in 2018 and 2024, despite pressures from terrorism and the historically threatening Algeria-Morocco strategic rivalry.

Keywords:
Small State Studies; Shelter Diplomacy; Strategic Rivalries; Sahel; Coup d'état; Mauritania; Political Stability; France.

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Introduction

Since the 1960s, Mauritania has found itself caught in the intersection of intense regional rivalries, particularly between Algeria and Morocco. Both nations have sought to influence Mauritania's alignment in their protracted conflict, undermining its domestic stability and jeopardizing its political, economic, and security interests on regional and international levels. This precarious position has defined Mauritania's post-independence trajectory, forcing it to navigate threats from its more powerful neighbors.

From its inception as a modern independent state, Mauritania's sovereignty faced significant challenges, particularly from Morocco. Under King Hassan II, Morocco claimed Mauritania as part of its historical domain, questioning its legitimacy as an independent state. In response, President Mokhtar Ould Daddah employed diplomatic measures to assert Mauritania's right to exist, culminating in Morocco's formal recognition in 1969. However, this recognition did not signify the end of territorial disputes. Moroccan figures, such as Hamid Chabat of the Istiqlal Party and Ahmed Raissouni, president of the International Union of Muslim Scholars (UIOM), revived similar claims in 2016 and 2022(Quid,2017). These assertions, alongside Moroccan educational narratives promoting the "Marocanité" of the Almoravid dynasty, continue to fuel an existential threat to Mauritania, alarming its political elites, including members of the ruling party (Bahri, 2024).

The rivalry between Algeria and Morocco has not remained confined to rhetoric. After the 1969 reconciliation with Morocco, Mauritania's alignment with Rabat during the Western Sahara conflict antagonized Algeria. This alignment triggered political instability, culminating in the ousting of President Mokhtar Ould Daddah. His memoirs recount a stark warning from Algerian President Houari Boumédiène: "If Mauritania signs the Madrid Agreement, Algeria will provide the Sahrawi fighters with all the material and human resources necessary to defend their territory. Since your country is the weakest link, it will be the first to be attacked" (Mauray Media, 2016). This underscores the threats Mauritania faced from Algeria, which sought to coerce it into aligning with its strategic objectives.

Mauritania's entanglement in these rivalries continued to destabilize its political landscape. In 1984, President Mohamed Khouna Ould Haidalla was overthrown in a coup after overtly supporting the Frente Polisario and aligning with Algeria. His successor, President Maaouya Ould Sid' Ahmed Taya, oscillated between fragile alliances with Algeria and Morocco, attempting to mitigate external threats while maintaining internal stability. For instance, during the Mauritanian-Senegalese war, King Hassan II support for Dakar further polarized the region (Pazzanita, 1992). Similarly, tensions with Algeria occasionally flared, as demonstrated by the expulsion of an Algerian diplomat from Nouakchott in 2015 (Le Courrier International, 2015).

Historically, Mauritania's strategy of aligning with regional powers; whether Algeria or Morocco; has brought both instability and economic isolation (Pazzanita, 1992). These dynamics highlight the precarious position of a small state navigating the rivalries of more powerful regional actors. Both Algeria and Morocco have exploited Mauritania's geographic vulnerabilities and limited resources to advance their agendas, exacerbating its domestic political fragility and threatening its sovereignty.

However, recent administrations, particularly under Presidents Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz (MOA) and Mohamed Ould Ghazouani (MOG), have pursued a more balanced foreign policy. This approach seeks to defuse the Algeria-Morocco rivalry and leverage Mauritania's position to secure stability and survival. A key element of this strategy is safeguarding Zouerate, the hub of Mauritania's iron production and an area deeply intertwined with the Western Sahara conflict. Rival powers have often used Zouerate's security as a bargaining chip, further complicating Mauritania's stability.

Since 2011, Mauritania has made tangible progress in managing these external pressures. This shift was epitomized in 2019 with the country's first peaceful constitutional transition, when President Ould Abdel Aziz stepped down, allowing Mohamed Ould Ghazouani to assume power (Bioforce, 2021). Remarkably, the Global Terrorism Index now classifies Mauritania as a very safe country. Additionally, Nouakchott has taken an active role in regional diplomacy, hosting summits, mediating conflicts, and participating in Sahel alliances. This is particularly notable given the destabilization of the Maghreb and Sahel regions since 2011, marked by the Libyan civil war, porous borders, rising terrorism, and frequent military coups in neighboring countries (Boukhars, 2020). Despite these challenges, Mauritania has witnessed a significant decline in coup attempts over the past decade.

This raises a critical question: how has Mauritania, a small state in a conflict-ridden region, managed to achieve domestic political stability despite constant pressure from powerful rivals? This research argues that Mauritania's stability is not a result of democratic governance or internal reforms but of its ability to strategically manage external support and rivalries. By securing political and military shelter from France and economic assistance from France, China, and international financial organizations, Mauritania has transformed the Algeria-Morocco rivalry from an existential threat into a manageable dynamic.

Ultimately, this study underscores the pivotal role of foreign policy in safeguarding the stability of small states. By focusing on external support and strategic diplomacy rather than internal factors such as governance or civil-military relations, Mauritania has successfully navigated the volatile regional landscape, ensuring its sovereignty and political continuity amidst persistent external threats.

The Predicaments of Small States: Mauritania

This article begins by positing that Mauritania, as a small state situated on the periphery of a strategic rivalry between Algeria and Morocco, has had its foreign policy

profoundly shaped by these regional dynamics. To contextualize this analysis, the concept of "small state" must first be clarified.

Mauritania is classified as a small state. David Vital (1967) proposed a dual framework for defining small states, which incorporates industrial and economic capabilities, population size, and foreign policy choices. He argued that small states are either advanced industrial nations with populations of 10–15 million or underdeveloped states with populations of 20–30 million. While this framework originated during the Cold War, it remains relevant today (Périer, 2020).

Size is understood here in a comprehensive sense, encompassing economic, military, and physical factors alongside the more common population-based criterion. Mauritania's population of 4.5 million aligns with Vital's definition, particularly as he established a higher threshold for underdeveloped states. As such, Mauritania's classification as a small state is justified (Maass, 2018, p. 74).

Economic indicators further reveal the fragility of Mauritania's economy. According to the World Population Review, the country's GDP is approximately $8 billion—comparable to Kosovo's in 2020. This economic weakness is compounded by persistent regional instability in the Sahel, a condition that has worsened since the collapse of the Qaddafi regime (Bisson, 2013a, p. 27). Additionally, the 2022 Global Firepower Index ranked Mauritania 125th out of 142 countries. These indicators reinforce Mauritania's classification as a small state, despite its territorial size; twice that of France; which challenges conventional assumptions about the physical dimensions of small states.

Another lens through which Mauritania can be viewed as a small state is its limited ability to play a significant role in maintaining the international system, these lens suggest that states with minimal involvement in global affairs are inherently small. Vital's qualitative approach further emphasizes this, classifying states with restricted participation in international issues as small. For instance, Mauritania has not been entrusted with any continental leadership roles by the African Union (AU) or other regional institutions, despite being an active AU member, including its presidencies in 2018 and 2024

Despite these limitations, Mauritania strongly supports the principles of international organizations, which emphasize equality among states regardless of size. Its foreign policy reflects a commitment to international law, exemplified by its backing of a UN-led resolution process for the Western Sahara conflict, Africa's oldest decolonization issue (Rapidinfo, 2022).

Small states typically lack the capacity to project power beyond their borders and favor peaceful conflict resolution. In Mauritania's case, its limited ability to control its own territory and monopolize the use of force has reinforced its opposition to military solutions. This preference for diplomacy is evident in its stance on conflicts in the Sahel, such as the crisis in Mali and its responses to military coups in the region.

Combining both quantitative and qualitative perspectives underscores Mauritania's categorization as a small state. Its structural weaknesses are further evident in its

historically fraught relations with Senegal, Morocco, and the Frente Polisario, as well as its proximity to Mali, a country plagued by instability and insecurity since 2012. Domestically, Mauritania has experienced several coups, further solidifying its status as a small and fragile state.

Geographic Location Aggravating Size Limitations

Mauritania's challenges as a small state are compounded by its geographic location. Situated along Africa's Atlantic coast, it serves as a geographical and cultural bridge between the Maghreb and Western sub-Saharan Africa. Culturally, Mauritania represents a transitional zone between Arab-Amazigh populations in North Africa and sub-Saharan communities. Much of its territory is dominated by the Sahara Desert, and until the 1970s drought, a significant portion of its population was nomadic. The country's natural resources include substantial reserves of iron ore, copper, and gypsum, along with some oil deposits, which are currently being exploited (Toupet, Henry, 2015).

As in most social sciences, there is no consensus on the definition of "small state". However, the dominant approaches; quantitative and qualitative; are widely used in the literature. This article applies these approaches to Mauritania's context, highlighting its dual challenges of size and location.

Mauritania's geographic realities influence its high-level decisions in diplomacy, security, and economic strategy. Its small size, combined with its vulnerable position in a geopolitically volatile region, underscores the intricate challenges it faces in navigating its foreign and domestic policy choices.

Literature Review

Research on Mauritanian foreign policy remains significantly underdeveloped, with existing literature offering limited insights into its diplomatic strategies and practices. Despite Mauritania's membership in the Arab Maghreb Union (UMA), established in 1989, it is often regarded as a peripheral player in the Maghreb. As a result, the country is frequently excluded from broader analyses of the region. For example, seminal works such as Samir Amin's The Maghreb in the Modern World (1970) and more contemporary studies like Lawless and Findlay's North Africa: Contemporary Politics and Economic Development (1984) make no mention of Mauritania (Seddon, 1996, p. 197). This notable omission underscores a significant gap in the scholarship on Mauritania's geopolitical and diplomatic roles.

Conceptualizing Mauritania's Political Stability

This study aims to explain Mauritania's remarkable political stability over the past 15 years, characterized by constitutional transitions and an absence of coups. Achieving this

requires an exploration of independent variables that interact to shape causality. To organize this analysis, the literature review is divided into two primary schools of thought: one emphasizing internal factors and the other focusing on external influences.

Understanding the Political Stability of Mauritania	
Internal factors	External factors
- Personality of President Mohamed Ould Abdelaziz (Justine Spiegel) - Democracy - Good governance - Civil-Military relations	- Foreign Policy of Mauritania (as outcomes of internal dynamics): The corporate interests of the Mauritanian military, political ideologies, and affinities of non-military elites. (Antony Pazzanita.) - "The necessity of considering the impact of strategic rivalries on the foreign policies of non-rival states: case of Tunisia" (Imad Mansour.) - Small States' Search for Shelter: case of Iceland. (Baldur Thorhallsson)

Internal Dynamics and Political Stability

Antony Pazzanita's foundational article (1992) provides key insights into Mauritania's foreign policy and its relationship to political stability. According to Pazzanita, three internal factors shape Mauritania's diplomatic behavior: the corporate interests of the Mauritanian military, the ideological leanings of political elites, and the affinities of non-military elites.

While Pazzanita does not explicitly link ideological affinities to the regional rivalries that influence training and education, these affinities are believed to shape regional preferences, ultimately impacting political stability. In The Search for Protection, Pazzanita argues that a foreign policy favoring alignment with one Maghrebi rival; such as Algeria or Morocco; inevitably disrupts Mauritania's neutrality, leading to coups d'état and political instability. This perspective underscores the significance of internal factors in Mauritania's stability, while implicitly acknowledging the impact of external pressures.

External Rivalries as Independent Variables

An alternative explanation focuses on the external context, particularly the influence of regional rivalries. Mansour's (2020) study, Explaining the Influence of Maghrebi Rivalries on Tunisian Foreign Policy, critiques existing Rivalry Studies for neglecting the impact of regional rivalries on the foreign policies of non-rival states. Mansour argues that regional rivalries often shape non-rival states' foreign policies as much as, or even more than, internal factors:

"The lack of explicit analysis on how the foreign policy of non-rivals is impacted or, perhaps, more accurately, constituted, by surrounding regional rivalries" (Mansour, 2020, p. 6).

While Mansour's analysis focuses on Tunisia's reliance on France to navigate the Algerian-Libyan rivalry and secure political stability, his findings are relevant to Mauritania. The country's geographical position and cultural ties similarly compel it to balance pressures from Algeria and Morocco, reinforcing its neutral stance as a key strategy for maintaining stability.

Leadership and Sovereign Behavior

A third explanation attributes Mauritania's political stability to the leadership of President Mohamed Ould Abdelaziz. Justine Spiegel (2014) describes Abdelaziz as an "électron libre", an independent actor who asserts Mauritania's sovereignty unapologetically. Unlike his predecessors, who sought to balance relations between Algiers and Rabat, Abdelaziz maintained a distinct position of neutrality, refusing to align with either rival. This diplomatic independence is seen as central to Mauritania's stability during his tenure.

However, Spiegel's account of Abdelaziz's behavior raises questions about the structural factors that enabled such sovereign conduct. Observers could argue that his leadership was bolstered by systemic guarantees, such as strong civil-military relations and strategic governance frameworks, which supported his ability to maintain neutrality despite regional pressures.

This literature review identified two primary frameworks for understanding Mauritania's political stability: the internal dynamics emphasized by Pazzanita and the external influences highlighted by Mansour. Both perspectives converge on the significance of Mauritania's strategic neutrality, bolstered by the leadership of Mohamed Ould Abdelaziz, as a crucial factor in maintaining stability. However, the scarcity of scholarly work on Mauritania's foreign policy underscores the need for further research to integrate domestic, regional, and leadership dimensions into a comprehensive analysis of its stability and diplomatic strategies.

Building on these insights, this article provides an explanation rooted in the concept of rivalries, focusing on how Mauritania's adept "shelter diplomacy" effectively managed the historically threatening nature of surrounding strategic rivalries. This nuanced management, which incorporates elements from the reviewed literature, has played a key role in achieving and sustaining political stability in the country.

Rivalry-Based Analysis

The relationship between Algeria and Morocco exemplifies a strategic rivalry. According to this framework, strategic rivals perceive each other as: (a) competitors, (b) sources of actual or potential threats that may escalate to militarization, and (c) enemies. Furthermore, such rivalries are often exacerbated by internal challenges, such as regime security concerns. Key factors that define strategic rivalries include expectations of threat, cognitive rigidity, and domestic political dynamics (Thompson, 2001a: 562). In the case of Algeria and Morocco, these criteria are fully met.

First, Algerian policymakers consistently view Morocco as a significant threat to their nation's territorial integrity, a perception rooted in historical tensions. Conversely, Morocco regards Algeria as a supporter of separatist movements, allegedly intent on dividing the Moroccan Kingdom. Second, cognitive rigidity extends beyond the political elite to the national elites in both Algiers and Rabat, perpetuating a narrative of hostility. Finally, domestic political processes, including regime security mechanisms and pressure groups advocating for the status quo, further entrench animosity. Algeria and Morocco thus "create and sustain dyadic relationships of structured hostility, with or without a great deal of continuous, external reinforcement" (Thompson, 2001). This rivalry has constructed significant barriers to cooperation and conflict de-escalation. For example, persistent border closures and the lack of direct communication between Algerian presidents and Moroccan kings reinforce norms of distrust.

The strategic rivalry between Algeria and Morocco exerts considerable pressure on neighboring non-rival states, such as Mauritania, complicating their foreign policy and stability. Mauritania, a highly strategic state for the two rivals, occupies a critical position as an observer in the Western Sahara decolonization process and serves as a vital corridor linking North Africa with Sub-Saharan Africa (Mondafrique, 2018).

A rivalry-based analysis posits that Mauritania's foreign policy; particularly its management of the Algeria-Morocco rivalry through strategic partnerships with major powers like France; represents a key factor in its political stability. Historical evidence underscores the impact of this rivalry on Mauritanian politics. For instance, the coups d'état against Ould Daddah in 1978 and Ould Haidallah in 1984 occurred during periods when Mauritania aligned itself with one of the two rivals.

Pazzanita's assessment indirectly highlights the influence of this rivalry on Mauritania's unstable foreign policy. He notes that the ideological orientations and political preferences of Mauritania's military elites, which have shaped the country's foreign policy, are linked to the rivalries of Algeria and Morocco. This influence is particularly evident in the education and training of Mauritanian elites during the early stages of training, as discussed in this paper's section on alumni networks.

Furthermore, Algiers and Rabat actively compete to increase their influence in Mauritania. For example, Taleb (2018) notes that "the Algerian-Moroccan rivalry in Africa has Mauritania as a starting point". Mauritania's reliance on iron exports from Zouerate; a region near the Algerian and Western Saharan borders; has heightened the country's focus on securing this economically critical area. Any shift in Mauritania's

foreign policy risks escalating threats from either rival, jeopardizing these extraction activities.

The rivalry's influence extends to Mauritania's relationships with its southern neighbors, Mali and Senegal, where Algeria and Morocco are believed to exert significant influence. Despite these challenges, Mauritania has managed to maintain a stable and consistent foreign policy. Remarkably, the country has avoided the instability typically associated with small states caught between strategic rivals. Instead, Mauritania has emerged as a bastion of stability in the region.

Over the past six years, Mauritania has hosted French-led counterterrorism summits, countering efforts by Algeria and Morocco to dominate the regional counterterrorism agenda (De Larramendi, 2018 a: 518). It has also taken a leading role in mediations, modernized its military (particularly in the north) with French assistance, and fortified its borders. Most notably, Mauritania recently witnessed its first peaceful and constitutional transfer of power between two elected presidents, further consolidating its stability.

To conclude, Mauritania's adept management of the Algeria-Morocco strategic rivalry, supported by strategic partnerships and an emphasis on neutrality, has been instrumental in maintaining its political stability. This rivalry-based analysis highlights the intricate interplay between external pressures and domestic resilience, offering valuable insights into the broader dynamics of small-state survival in geopolitically contested regions.

Shelter Theory: Explaining Mauritania's Rivalry-Evading Politics

Small states, due to their inherent vulnerabilities compared to larger states, must adopt strategies to mitigate their military, political, economic, and societal weaknesses. One key approach involves forging alliances with larger states and seeking membership in regional and international organizations. This often entails sacrificing some degree of sovereignty and incurring greater costs than larger states, all in exchange for enhanced military security, political stability, economic prosperity, and societal security (Thorhallsson, 2018a: 6). According to Thorhallsson, small states must compensate for their structural weaknesses to ensure survival and prosperity. These weaknesses typically include smaller populations, limited domestic markets and GDP, smaller territorial size, and reduced military capabilities compared to larger states. However, the theory posits that small states can offset these vulnerabilities through specific domestic and/or external measures (Thorhallsson, 2018a: 384).

With regard to domestic arrangements, the theory suggests that small states can introduce internal reforms or concessions to foster stability and ensure survival. For instance, aligning their internal political systems with those of neighboring or regional powers can enhance stability and strengthen beneficial relations with surrounding actors. While this paper does not explore this internal dimension in detail, it is worth noting that Mauritania has implemented such measures as part of its broader political strategy.

The focus of the present research, however, is solely on the external dimension of building or receiving shelter.

Shelter Theory draws on literature on small states and International Relations, which often highlights the vulnerability of such states to external threats. The concept of "shelter" is based on three interconnected aspects: first, reducing the risk of potential threats through political or military backing; second, assisting in absorbing shocks during crises; and third, providing support in the aftermath of crises, particularly in the economic domain. David Vital argues that small states struggle to manage crises independently and thus rely on the political, economic, and societal shelter provided by larger states or multilateral institutions (Thorhallsson, 2018a: 385).

Shelter can manifest in several forms. The first, political shelter, involves direct and visible diplomatic or military support, or strategic protection from another state or international organization. Second, economic shelter can take the form of direct financial assistance, participation in currency unions, support from external financial institutions, favorable loans, preferential market access, or membership in a common market. Third, societal shelter may involve cultural exchanges, norms, ideologies, and symbolic acts that reinforce the identity and legitimacy of the small state. These different forms of shelter will inform the structure and analysis of the subsequent sections of this article.

Political Shelter with France

High-Level Political Meetings and Declared Alliances: France as a Priority

For small states, political shelter primarily involves forming coalitions, establishing political alliances, obtaining membership in international organizations, and adhering to internationally accepted norms. These measures are essential for securing diplomatic support during critical moments. This section examines the frequency of high-level political meetings as an indicator of robust political support. It aims to outline how Mauritania prioritizes its political partners, identifying those with whom it aligns most closely to ensure strong diplomatic backing during times of crisis, when shelter becomes crucial. This analysis highlights the political commitments Mauritania has made in pursuit of its strategic interests.

Summitry between Mauritania and Algeria (2010/2024)	
Visits of Mauritanian Presidents to Algeria	Visits of Algerian Presidents to Mauritania
- 2011: State visit of President Ould Abdelaziz to Algiers. (Nawal, 2011) - A decade without summits (2011/2021) - 2021: State visit of President Mohamed Ould Ghazouani to Algeria. (RFI, 2021) - Multilateralism: Visit of President Ghazouani to Algiers. (Arab Summit: bilateral discussions at the sidelines) - January 2024: President Ghazouani visits Tindouf in Algeria and meets with his counterpart. - February 2024: Ghazouani heads to Algiers to participate at the GECF summit.	- No visits.

Figure I. 1: Summitry between Algeria and Mauritania. (Source: different articles).

Summitry between Mauritania and Morocco (2010/2023)	
Visits of Mauritanian Presidents to Morocco	Visits of Moroccan Kings to Mauritania
No visits	No visits

Figure I. 2: Summitry between Morocco and Mauritania. (Source: different articles).

Summitry between France and Mauritania (2010/2023)	
Visits of Mauritanian Presidents to France	Visits of French Presidents to Mauritania
- April 2017: Ould Abdelaziz visits the outgoing President François Hollande. (YouTube, 2017) - December 2017: Summit on the Sahel: President Ould Abdelaziz visits France. - October 2018: Official visit of President Ould Abdelaziz to France. (elhadath, 2018) - June 2019: Last official visit of President Ould Abdelaziz. (Nawafid, 2019) - January 2020 : State visit of President Ghazouani to France and participation at the Pau Summit. - Mai 2021: Official visit of President Ghazouani to Paris and participation at the "Summit on Financing African Economies" (AMI, 2021) - June 2021: Private visit of President Ghazouani to France. (Chezvlane, 2021) - Mai 2024: Macron receives Ghazouani in Paris. (Elysée, 2024)	- Macron, July 2018.(RAF, 2018) - 2019: Visit of François Hollande, as a former President. - Emmanuel Macron June 2020 : Attending the G5S Summit. (Larcher, 2020)

Figure I. 3: Summitry between France and Mauritania. Source: (different articles and websites 2010/2024).

While frequent meetings between Mauritania and its immediate neighbors might suggest amicable relations, they contrast sharply with the country's engagements with France. Mauritania has developed a strategic partnership with France, which enables it to manage its relations with Algeria and Morocco more autonomously. Mauritanian presidents regularly meet with their French counterparts in Paris and receive them in Nouakchott, demonstrating the prioritization of France in its foreign policy. In contrast, Mauritania shows far less commitment to cultivating relationships with its Maghreb neighbors. The frequency, intensity, and nature of these high-level political meetings, as outlined in Tables I.1, I.2, and I.3, serve as key indicators of the source of Mauritania's shelter and its efforts to strengthen its position amidst regional pressures. A small and economically vulnerable Sahelian state like Mauritania would likely be more eager to develop its relations with Algeria and Morocco if it did not have such strong and frequent ties with a major power like France, which has supported Mauritania's leadership and sovereignty, particularly after President Ould Abdelaziz's coup against Ould Cheikh Abdallah in 2008; a strong indicator of shelter during the Mauritanian ruling regime' critical moments (Djerad, 2017).

Mauritania's ties with France have been particularly evident in the frequency of visits by French officials. Former President François Hollande's visit to Atar, a city in northern Mauritania near the Western Sahara conflict, in 2019 is a notable example. This visit, particularly by a former president, can also be seen as a symbol of political shelter. The presence of a high-ranking French official in a region of strategic importance sends a clear message to the northern belligerents.

The most significant and revealing aspect of Mauritania's foreign policy is the low intensity of its relations with its Maghrebian neighbors. For example, the last visit by an Algerian president to Mauritania occurred in 1997, when Liamine Zeroual visited. Similarly, Mohamed Ould Abdelaziz, who ruled Mauritania for a decade, visited Algiers only once, in 2011. Relations with Morocco have been even more distant, with the last visit by a Mauritanian president to Morocco occurring in 2004, and the last visit by a Moroccan king to Mauritania taking place in 2001. These infrequent interactions underscore the lack of significant political engagement between Mauritania and its neighboring rivals.

Despite these strained relations, Mauritania has managed to resist pressure from Algeria and Morocco due to its strong political relationship with France. Table I.3 illustrates the tangible benefits of this shelter, with Nouakchott's close ties to Paris providing significant protection against regional pressures. The intensity of high-level contacts between Mauritania and France has consistently favored the French-Mauritanian side, with Mauritanian presidents showing considerable enthusiasm for visiting France. Notably, the French Foreign Ministry played a key role in preventing Mauritania from facing international isolation following President Ould Abdelaziz's 2008 coup. The United States, the European Union, and the African Union sought to isolate Mauritania diplomatically, but France publicly defended the country in international forums, signaling the start of a new phase in their bilateral relationship (Ould Islek, 2018).

This high level of political engagement between France and Mauritania is considered a form of shelter for several reasons. At the end of press conferences between French presidents and their Mauritanian counterparts, as well as in most partnership and cooperation agreements, statements are often made to the effect of: "France, as Mauritania's primary political and strategic partner, supports Mauritania within the international community and, in particular, the European Union, as well as in its regional environment." The "regional environment" referred to here undoubtedly refers to the Maghrebian rivalry and its regional implications, as evidenced by events such as Opération Lamentin and the instability in Mali. These special relations foster significant cooperation in defense and security. For nearly four years, France has supported Mauritania's logistical and training efforts to counter the threat posed by terrorism and AQIM (Diplomatie.fr, 2023).

Military Shelter with France: Overcoming the Pressures of Algeria-Morocco Rivalry

This section examines how Mauritania, as a small state, has mitigated pressures stemming from the Algeria-Morocco strategic rivalry and terrorism in the Sahel region. This has been achieved through reliance on French-backed security initiatives, strategic agreements with Paris, military cooperation, and other mechanisms to secure military shelter.

Military Presence in Mauritania

Historically, Mauritania has been caught in the crossfire of Algeria-Morocco rivalries. During the 1975 Sahrawi offensive against Nouakchott, Algeria supported the Frente Polisario, while Morocco; seen as a key instigator of several coup attempts; provided Senegal with arms and support during its war with Mauritania. Since the breakdown of the ceasefire between the Polisario and Morocco in 2020, tensions have escalated, with Morocco targeting Mauritanian gold seekers in the north using drones, sparking several low-profile diplomatic crises (The North Africa Journal, 2024).

Given these challenges, Mauritania's poorly equipped and inadequately trained military heavily depends on foreign support for technical, logistical, and operational assistance, which France has consistently provided. The presence of a major power's military forces symbolizes security assurance for small states like Mauritania. France's Operation Serval (2013–2014) aimed, according to the Quai D'Orsay, to halt the advance of jihadist groups, protect European and French nationals in Mali, and restore Mali's territorial integrity. Mauritania actively supported this intervention, fearing the spillover effects of instability from the Malian Azawad region, which heightened security threats along its borders.

Similarly, Operation Barkhane offered counterterrorism training and advisory support to the armed forces of Mali and other G5 Sahel member states, including Mauritania. It also worked to combat armed terrorist groups in collaboration with local and international forces, providing critical relief for Mauritania's 2,273-km-long border with Mali (Baudais, 2021, p. 22). Although limited information exists on French military presence during Operation Serval, Operation Barkhane saw the establishment of a French military base in Atar, northern Mauritania (Boolumbal, 2014).

Strategic Agreements and Pacts

Mauritania's military shelter extends beyond direct military presence to strategic agreements and mutual defense pacts. The Franco-Mauritanian independence agreements represent a cornerstone of this relationship, articulated in bilateral and legally binding terms. These agreements outline mutual aid commitments for defense

preparedness, granting Mauritania the right to call on France under specific conditions for internal and external security.

Accompanying the main text of the agreements are two annexes: one concerning the functioning of defense committees and the other addressing cooperation in raw materials and strategic products. Additionally, the Technical Military Assistance Agreement (AMT) sets out the framework for collaboration between the two militaries, aimed at strengthening Mauritania's defense capabilities.

Despite attempts by Mauritania to independently secure technical, material, and logistical support; often constrained by French pressure; the longstanding sovereignty costs associated with French military assistance persist. Since 1963, this assistance has been underpinned by diplomatic, cooperative, and military collaboration mechanisms. Mauritania has strategically maintained beneficial agreements with France during periods of intensified rivalry between Algeria and Morocco, ensuring its survival amidst threats from regional powers.

For instance, Operation Lamentin, in which French forces supported Mauritania against the Frente Polisario, exemplifies France's commitment to backing Mauritania during periods of war and tension. In recent years, bilateral military relations have deepened, as evidenced by the frequent meetings between Mauritanian and French military officials and the 2023 visit of Chief of Staff Général Thierry Burchard to Nouakchott.

By leveraging military shelter through strategic agreements and French presence, Mauritania has successfully navigated the complexities of regional rivalries while bolstering its defense posture.

Offered Training Programs: Alumni Influence

Backgrounds of the Mauritanian Presidents	
President	Graduate of
Mokhtar Ould Daddah 1960-1978	Nice (France) Dakar (*Colonie du Sénégal, France*)
Moustapha Ould Mohamed Saleck 1978-1979	Ecole Nationale des Sous-officiers Actives, Saint-Maixent, France
Mahmoud Ould Louly 1979-1980	France
Mohamed Khouna Ould Haidallah 1980-1984	Académie Militaire de Saint-Cyr, France
Maaouiya Ould Taya 1984-2005	Ecole Supérieure de Guerre, Paris, France
Ely Ould Mohamed Vall 2005-2007	Meknes, Morocco
Mohamed Ould Cheikh Abdallahi 2007-2008	Grenoble, France
Mamadou Ba 2008	Paris, France
Mohamed Ould Abdelaziz	Morocco, Algeria, France
Mohamed Ould Ghazouani	Morocco, Jordan, France

Figure II.1: Backgrounds of the Mauritanian Presidents (1960-2024). (Source: website of the Mauritanian presidency).

From a constitutional perspective, the President holds the highest position in Mauritania's security decision-making hierarchy, serving as the supreme commander of the National Army. Analyzing the data presented in Table II.1 reveals that most Mauritanian presidents have been graduates of French military academies, underscoring

France's significant role in shaping the country's national elite. This observation suggests that French military education not only provides security shelter but also acts as a form of political and cultural shelter by imparting norms and values or sympathy.

Choosing France as a destination for military training is not inherently problematic; Mauritania's elites could have selected alternative pathways after independence. However, studying in France often involves immersion in French language and culture, which may predispose political leaders to adopt Francophone or Francophile tendencies; or both. This cultural influence might help explain the frequent private visits of Mauritanian presidents to France, as noted earlier.

Mauritanian Commitment to French-Led Security Initiatives

This section explores Mauritania's involvement in subregional security organizations led by France, highlighting its commitment to French-backed initiatives and their implications for its national security.

G5 Sahel and Mauritania's Role

To address security and development challenges in the Sahel, Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger established the G5 Sahel (G5S) during a summit in Nouakchott on December 19, 2014. This French-backed initiative emerged as a regional platform to coordinate efforts against terrorism and promote development. In response to escalating unrest, the G5 Sahel Joint Force (FC-G5S) was created in 2017 as a counterterrorism task force. Supported by the United Nations and the European Union Training Mission in Mali (EUTM Mali), this force operates primarily in the Liptako-Gourma border area of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger (Baudais, 2021, p. 27).

The headquarters of the G5 Sahel is permanently based in Nouakchott, reflecting Mauritania's strong commitment to the initiative (Internet Archives, 2017). Mauritanian President Mohamed Ould Abdelaziz is often regarded as the "main architect" of this coalition due to his military expertise in counterterrorism and his diplomatic leadership in forging this partnership (*Jeune Afrique, 2017*).

The G5 Sahel faces several critical challenges, including limited funding, insufficient institutional capacities among member states, and fragmented political cooperation. While France championed the initiative and Morocco welcomed its creation, Algeria viewed it as a French attempt to circumvent its proposed Joint Military Staff Committee of the Sahel Region (CEMOC). Additionally, fostering collaboration among member states, coordinating with other stakeholders, and gaining the trust of local populations remain significant hurdles.

Despite these obstacles, Mauritania's commitment to the G5 Sahel framework is evident. As shown in Table II.1, Nouakchott has actively participated in meetings, secured international support, and benefited from France's backing as a great power.

Notably, the absence of the disruptive Algerian-Moroccan rivalry within this framework has also contributed to the initiative's relative success in offering Mauritania a robust security shelter.

Mauritania's consistent support for French-led security initiatives underscores its status as a key beneficiary of France's military and political support in the Sahel. Many observers regard Mauritania as a unique case in the region. Its proactive engagement and effective use of French security shelter have even led to its removal from the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs' list of unsafe travel destinations (Périer, 2020). Yet, Mauritania's ability to maintain stability, despite regional chaos in Mali and strategic rivalry to its north, is not solely due to external security shelter, the country has also implemented significant reforms and enhancements to its armed forces. According to Périer (2017):

"The number of soldiers has been increased, salaries raised, equipment adapted, and training and tactics updated with the assistance of the French and the Americans, albeit according to a purely Mauritanian vision."

These reforms have strengthened Mauritania's national defense capabilities, complementing its reliance on external security support.

In conclusion, Mauritania's robust commitment to French-led security initiatives, coupled with its internal military reforms, has enabled it to navigate the complexities of the Sahel region effectively. This unique approach highlights the interplay between external security partnerships and domestic military development in ensuring the survival and stability of a small state in a volatile region.

	Mauritanian Commitment to French Security Initiatives
2017	Mali: Bamako Summit. French and Mauritanian Presidents attend the G5 Sahel meeting (RFI, 2017). Additionally, France organizes a second Summit to support G5 Sahel funding. Saudi Arabia, Emirates, and the EU promise respective funding amounts of 100 million USD, 30 million USD, and 50 million USD (RFI, 2017).
2018	Participation of President Mohamed Ould Abdelaziz in the Niamey G5S Summit in Niger (AMI, 2018) and in the Brussels Summit of support for the G5 Sahel's Funding (France24, 2018). During that summit, the EU declared its intention to increase its contribution to the G5S's budget to 100 million USD.
2019	Participation of Mauritanian President Mohamed Ould Abdelaziz in the Ouagadougou Summit in Burkina Faso (Essahraa, 2019).
2020	Attendance of the newly elected Mauritanian president, Mohamed Ould Ghazouani, at the Pau Summit in France (Elysée, 2020). Mauritania hosted a G5S Summit in Nouakchott, where President Ghazouani and President Macron co-chaired the meeting (AMI, 2020).
2021	Nouakchott G5 Summit, where the Malian Prime Minister participated but not the President, amid a crisis between Mali and France. (Anadolu, 2021).
2022	Crisis in Mali: Bamako withdraws from the G5 Sahel (Douce, 2022). CEMOC became the only platform where Malian military officials could hold Sahelian multilateral meetings, which is significant for Nouakchott. - Coup d'état in Burkina Faso. - Spread of the Anti-Françafrique sentiment across the Sahel, facilitating involvement of new actors: Algeria, Morocco, Turkey, and Russia (including Wagner).
2022	France' crises with Mali: Bilateral meetings between France and Mauritania
2023	France' crises with Mali and Niger: the first G5 Summit since 2021 is scheduled, but without Mali.

	Ghazouani attends the meeting (RFI, 2023).

Figure II. 1: Mauritanian Commitment to French Security Initiatives. (Source: Journals and Newspaper Articles, 2017-2023).

The assertions regarding Mauritania's preference for the French-backed initiatives and frameworks over others such as the Algerian-offered CEMOC (Comité d'Etat-Major Opérationnel Conjoint) military backing can be substantiated by the following noticeable factors:

When chiefs of staff and even generally their deputies lead Mauritanian and other members' delegations to CEMOC sessions, Presidents Aziz and Ghazouani consecutively participate with their Sahelian counterparts in the alternative French-backed G5S meetings. Similarly, while French high officials take the lead on their initiatives, Algiers sends its (Armée Nationale Populaire) ANP's number three to the CEMOC sessions. Institutionally, G5S relies more on semi-annual high-level summitry than on yearly ordinary sessions, and given that non-democratic regimes are typically governed by the high executive power or the strongman, the participation of the president himself is a strong indicator of engagement and commitment.

Finally, the commitment Mauritania is showing is defined as strong due to the low engagement Nouakchott has with Algeria, especially towards its CEMOC initiative. This could be explained by a fear of Algerian hegemony over the region and a preference to deal and compromise with a great power rather than to submit a percentage of sovereignty into a geopolitically-motivated platform launched by a regional actor maintaining a strategic rivalry with another neighbor of Mauritania. Additionally, Mauritanian commitment to French-backed initiatives is also aimed at protecting the country from what Djallil Lounnas describes as tacit agreements between states and armed groups or rebels, particularly between Algerian intelligence services and Azawad top leaders. This card that Algiers could use as pressure over Nouakchott would have been surpassed by reliance on France. (Lounnas, 2014).

To conclude, Mauritania, as a small state, has successfully obtained comprehensive security shelter with France, a major power, while managing to avoid entanglement or dependency towards the Algeria-Morocco strategic rivalry. This evidence supports the principles of shelter theory, demonstrating how Mauritania could be considered a genuine protégé of France in the region. While Mauritania's primary focus appears to be on hosting the French-backed G5 Sahel summits and serving as its headquarters, the country prefers signing clear military agreements with France, sending its soldiers for French training, facilitating French military presence, and participating in various cooperation platforms led by France. The strategic rivalry between Algeria and Morocco has apparently taught Mauritania the importance of self-protection and avoiding dependency on either side. Instead, for small states like Mauritania, maintaining sovereignty by engaging with great powers and international organizations may be a better option than risking sovereignty amidst a surrounding strategic rivalry between two actors competing for the status of the main regional power.

Economic Shelter with Great Powers and International Organizations

Mauritania, a small state with a GDP of $9.8 billion; comparable to that of Kosovo; faces several structural economic weaknesses. Using Thorhallsson's terminology, external actors providing economic shelter to Mauritania have targeted key areas of vulnerability within its economy. The country remains heavily reliant on traditional extractive industries, including iron, gold, and copper, as well as agriculture and fishing. This dependence on primary sectors underscores a significant structural weakness.

Efforts toward economic diversification have led to the emergence of new resources, such as oil and gas, and the development of new sectors, including telecommunications. Since 2001, the telecommunications sector has grown at an impressive average annual rate of 26% (Sobh, 2023; Iraqi, 2017). Despite these developments, Mauritania's economic structure remains fragile and highly susceptible to external shocks.

Mauritania's reliance on commodity prices significantly exacerbates its vulnerability to economic crises. For instance, the decline in global metal prices in 2015 and the economic disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic severely impacted its economy, leading to a pronounced slowdown in growth between 2014 and 2016. This downturn also magnified Mauritania's debt burden, which stood at 78.4% of GDP in 2014. A major portion of this debt includes unresolved loans from Kuwait, further complicating the country's fiscal stability (Manciaux, 2015).

Adding to these vulnerabilities is the depreciation of the national currency, the Ouguiya, which has contributed to an increased risk of debt default. According to international standards, Mauritania's risk of non-repayment has escalated from "moderate" to "high." Additionally, structural issues such as poorly distributed economic growth, limited diversification—where the extractive sector accounts for approximately 70% of exports and 30% of government revenues (Fujas, 2015)—and an unfavorable business climate continue to weaken the economy.

Development Assistance as a Dimension

International and economic aid to developing countries, such as Mauritania, often aims to accelerate the pace of those nations' economic progress until they are capable of sustaining growth at a satisfactory rate. In a development program, the role of outside capital is not to immediately improve living conditions in the recipient states but rather to help them transition from economic stagnation to self-sustaining economic growth (Rosenstein, 1961a:107). Aid involves economic assistance from one country to another, usually from the developed world to less developed countries (LDCs). Aid can take various forms, such as: a- debt Relief; forgiving debt can save LDCs annual interest payments and provide them with more resources for internal investment. b- direct aid; providing food, money, and healthcare supplies directly to countries in need. c- indirect

Aid; financing the construction of infrastructure and communication networks, enabling countries to develop (Tejvan, 2023).

According to the website of the French Ministry of Finance, France is the largest bilateral donor in Mauritania. In fact, French development aid amounted to close to $40 million between 2019 and 2020, surpassing Saudi Arabia's $34.5 million, Germany's $23.5 million, and the United States' $17 million.

The aid consisted of grants. For example, the AFD (French Agency for Development) and the French Embassy in Nouakchott are implementing around thirty projects and actions in 2023, with a total amount of €180 million.

Trade as a Dimension: Insights from 2017 to 2021

It is important to see with which countries Nouakchott trades more.

	Main Import Partners	Main Export Partners
2017	South Korea 18.08% Emirates 8.91% Norway 7.84%	**China 35.02%** Switzerland 15.02% Spain 11.00%
2018	Emirates 14.40% Spain 10.99% Belgium 10.91%	**China 31.25%** Spain 15.04% Switzerland 9.42%
2019	Emirates 13.30% Spain 11.40% **China 10.74%**	**China 38.63%** Spain 15.19% Japan 8.40%
2020	Spain 14.58% Emirates 14.22% France 8.44%	**China 33.93%** Switzerland 17.99% Canada 10.00%
2021	China 20.00% Turkey 11.71% France 11.4%	**China 42.51%** Spain 9.34% Canada 8.14%

Figure III. 1: Main Trading Partners of Mauritania (2017/2020). (Source: Word Integrated Tarde Solution Website).

As illustrated in Table III.1, Mauritania has maintained diverse trade relationships with multiple partners from 2017 to 2021. On the import side, the most notable observation is the steady and stable trading relationship with the United Arab Emirates. Additionally, imports from China have demonstrated remarkable growth, doubling between 2019 and 2021 (Table III.2). Surprisingly, France; a key political and security ally of Mauritania; does not feature prominently among its top trading partners, as previously emphasized in this analysis.

On the export front, a particularly significant trend is the sustained growth of Mauritanian exports to China. By 2021, China accounted for 42.51% of Mauritania's total exports, representing $1.76 billion out of the country's estimated $4.14 billion in export revenues. This data highlights Mauritania's success in diversifying its trade partnerships while fostering a robust trading relationship with China.

The data contradicts initial expectations regarding France's potential as a primary economic shelter for Mauritania. In 2021, trade between France and Mauritania amounted to €223 million. French exports to Mauritania totaled €178 million, giving France a market share of 11.4% and positioning it as the country's third-largest supplier. This outcome challenges the assumption of France's dominance in economic shelter provision, suggesting instead that China has emerged as a preferred economic partner. This preference exists even over regional neighbors like Morocco, which has historically leveraged the Guerguerat border passage to exert political pressure on Mauritania.

The analysis aligns with the shelter theory's assertion that great powers often act as shelter providers. However, it is China, rather than France, that fulfills this role in Mauritania's trade landscape. This finding resonates with the Icelandic case foundational to shelter theory, which demonstrated that while the United States offered extensive diplomatic and military backing to Iceland, the Nordic states and international organizations provided substantial economic and societal shelter.

Despite its secondary role in Mauritania's trade relationships, France's position as a key political and military shelter provider remains unchallenged. France continues to offer development assistance and maintains its influence through military and security cooperation. This multi-dimensional presence ensures that Paris remains a vital partner for Mauritania, even if its role as an economic shelter is limited. Finally, while Mauritania has successfully diversified its trade partnerships and strengthened economic ties with China, France retains its importance as a political and military ally. This duality underscores the nuanced nature of shelter theory, demonstrating that economic shelter can be decoupled from political and military reliance on a single great power.

Favourable Loans as a Dimension

Favourable loans are a form of economic shelter that Nouakchott considerably needs. Indeed, the following tables list most of the loans that Nouakchott has been delivered during the last six years. An emphasis is put on the amount and the country or organization of origin.

The Year	Context	The Credit's Amount
2017-2018-2019 Extension request, 2017/2021	According to the IMF website, Mauritania had to adjust. The context was a plunge in metal prices, the necessary budget cuts, currency depreciation, and borrowing resulted in low growth, higher external debt, and higher risks to financial stability.(IMF, 2023)	IMF Executive Board Approves US$ 163.9 MillionArrangement.
2022	Covid 19 Crisis.	The IMF Executive Board approved 42-month arrangements in the amount of US$ 86.9 Million for The Islamic Republic of Mauritania..

Figure III.2: Loans to Mauritania from the IMF. (Source : Homepage of the IMF, 2023).

Year	Institution	Credit's Amount	Context
2017	World Bank and IMF	7 Billion Ouguiya	Building of a clean energy station.

		(203 Million $)	(Royapost, 2017)
2020	World Bank	The World Bank Board of Executive Directors approved three grants for a total of $133 million from the International Development Association (IDA), including funding from the Refugee and Host Communities IDA.	According to the World Bank homepage, the credit was to help improve access to basic infrastructure and services for poor and vulnerable communities in the southern regions of Mauritania. (World bank, 2023)
2021	African Development Bank.(BAD)	The African Development Bank grants 10 million euros to BCI (Banque du Commerce et d'Industrie Mauritanienne).	According to the bank's homepage, the aim was to strengthen the role of SMEs (Startups) in economic recovery. (AFDB, 2023)
2022	World Bank	83 Million $	For economic development. (mauriact.info, 2022)
2023	IFAD: InternationalFund for AgriculturalDevelopment.	The International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) and the Government of the Islamic Republic of Mauritania have signed a loan agreement for 5 million euros.	To finance the "Joint Sahel Program in response to the Challenges of COVID-19, Conflicts and Climate Change" (ReliefWeb, 2023)
2023	African Development Bank BAD	Mauritania: The African Development Bank and the Bank for Trade and Industry Group (BCI) sign aUS$485.000	Finance Action for Women in Africa (AFAWA) technical Bank for Trade and Industry Group (BCI) sign aUS$485.000

Figure III. 3: Loans to Mauritania from External Financial Institutions. (Source: Homepages of different banks.).

The Year	The Country	The Amount	Declared Objective
2017	Kuwait	34 Million Dollars.	To develop electricity Programs.(KUNA, 2017)
2018	NA	NA	NA
2019	Kuwait	176 Million Dollars.	Modernizing infrastructures between Mauritania and Mali.(Anbaa, 2019)
2020	Emirates	2 Billion Dollar (GDP of Mauritania in 2020: 5,2 BillionDollar)	Economic Development and Counterterrorism (Jeuneafrique, 2020)
2020	Kuwait	32 Million Dollars.	Routes construction. (Essahraa, 2020)
2022	Saudi Arabia	Loan (Crédit) of 300 Million Dollars.	For adjusting the annual budget. (Ecssr.ae, 2022)

Figure III. 4: Loans from States (Gulf Monarchies). (Source: different articles 2017/2023).

The data presented in Tables III.2, III.3, and III.4 demonstrates that Mauritania has strategically sought economic shelter by securing favourable loans from a diverse range of international partners. These loans primarily originated from external financial institutions, such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, as well as from Gulf monarchies.

Tables III.2 and III.3 indicate that external financial institutions have provided Mauritania with approximately $700 million in loans over the past six years. In contrast, loans from Gulf monarchies were significantly higher during the same period, totaling around $2.8 billion (Table III.4). Unlike politically charged bilateral aid, loans from international organizations tend to carry fewer political costs (Ruttan, 1989). This distinction is crucial, as it reduces the risks of political interference, such as those historically associated with Mauritania's foreign relations, which have occasionally contributed to political instability, including coups d'état.

The IMF, according to its official mission statement, "does not provide loans for specific projects, unlike development banks. Instead, it offers financial assistance to countries affected by crises, granting them breathing room to address challenges". For Mauritania, critical periods such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the 2014–2015

commodity price crash highlighted the IMF's role as a vital economic shelter. Over four years, Mauritania secured nearly $500 million in loans from the IMF (Table III.2).

The leadership of Christine Lagarde, a French national close to President Nicolas Sarkozy, during her tenure as IMF Managing Director was notable in this context. Lagarde, who held the position during politically tumultuous times following a coup d'état, visited Nouakchott in 2013 to reinforce Mauritania's economic engagement with the IMF, as documented on the organization's official website.

Table III.4 further highlights Mauritania's success in obtaining substantial financial support from Gulf monarchies over the past six years. Key contributors include Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia, which collectively provided loans and financial assistance totalling $2.8 billion. This financial support aligns with the strategic alliances between France and its Gulf partners in the MENA region, reinforcing Mauritania's ties to France's broader network of influence (Colombo, 2021).

Mauritania's approach to securing economic shelter underscores the importance of diversifying financial partnerships. By relying on international financial institutions for less politically intrusive loans and leveraging the generosity of Gulf monarchies, Nouakchott has been able to address critical economic vulnerabilities. The combination of these financial sources reflects Mauritania's adeptness in navigating its economic challenges while minimizing political risks.

Conclusion

To conclude, this paper began by highlighting two critical points: the historical pressures on Mauritania's political stability posed by its northern neighbours and its previous struggles in managing the strategic rivalry between Algeria and Morocco. These factors significantly heightened Mauritania's vulnerability as a small and weak state. The analysis then detailed how Mauritania has effectively mitigated these pressures and threats by adopting a strategy of shelter diplomacy, which has strengthened its stability and resilience across various sectors.

Mauritania's strategic alignment with France has been central to its shelter diplomacy. By granting France a military presence, training its soldiers under French guidance, supporting French-led initiatives, and signing highly strategic agreements, Nouakchott has secured political stability and safety. This approach has exempted Mauritania from engaging seriously or forcefully in initiatives like Algeria's CEMOC (Joint Operational Staff Committee) or Morocco's African Lion exercises. Furthermore, it has reversed the dynamic with its northern neighbours, positioning Mauritania as a challenging actor for Algerian and Moroccan political leaders, rather than the reverse. Mauritania's favourable relationship with a permanent member of the UN Security Council further bolsters its position, adding significant diplomatic leverage.

In the economic sphere, Mauritania has pursued a balanced and diversified approach to sheltering. It has cultivated trade relations with China, received development assistance from France, and secured loans from international organizations and Gulf

countries. This diversification has shielded Mauritania from economic pressures by Algeria and Morocco, preventing either from exploiting its vulnerabilities or imposing costly dependencies. For instance, Nouakchott effectively neutralized potential economic threats, such as Morocco's use of the Guerguerat passage as leverage or Algeria's strategically motivated humanitarian aid and financial generosity.

Notably, while France has played a dominant role in providing political and security shelter, economic shelter has been more diversified, involving international organizations, China, and Gulf monarchies. This multifaceted approach aligns with the premises of shelter theory, which does not require dependence on a single major power. Instead, Mauritania's nuanced shelter strategy demonstrates its diplomatic sophistication. While France's influence remains significant across political, security, and economic dimensions, the inclusion of China as a key trading partner and Gulf monarchies as substantial financial supporters complicates a strict interpretation of the theory, particularly in its economic application.

Mauritania's well-executed shelter diplomacy has delivered remarkable political stability, as evidenced by the country's first peaceful transfer of power between elected presidents in 2019. Additionally, it has enabled Nouakchott to disengage politically from regional rivalries while focusing on economic development and prosperity, avoiding dependency on either Algiers or Rabat. Importantly, Mauritania has transformed its surrounding regional rivalry from a source of danger into a strategic advantage, marking a significant departure from its historical challenges.

In conclusion, for non-rival states encircled by strategic competition, shelter diplomacy emerges as a highly effective strategy for survival and political advancement. Mauritania's case underscores this approach's potential, offering a valuable model for other small states in similar geopolitical contexts.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing or financial interests in the production and publication of this study. All disclosed information is correct to the authors' knowledge.

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The security situation of Sahel countries: A test of African military politics

Book Review: African Military Politics in the Sahel. Regional Organizations and International Politics by Katharina P. W. Döring.[1][2]

János Besenyő[3]

As a researcher on African conflicts and peace operations, my attention was recently drawn to the recent book by Katharina P. W. Döring, researcher at Södertörn University, titled *African Military Politics in the Sahel: Regional Organizations and International Politics*. The author is no stranger to the field of African peacekeeping, having published several authoritative papers on African armies, security politics, and conflicts in previous years.[4] Therefore, as a former peacekeeper who has been actively involved in several peace operations in Africa, I read with enormous interest her latest book, which is based to a large extent on her previous doctoral and post-doctoral research.

In her book, the author seeks to answer how and what common solutions African leaders are seeking to counter the increasingly active terrorist and armed groups in the Sahel countries, particularly Mali, which threaten the security of their countries and the region. One of the most visible elements of this is military intervention (pp. 62–63). The author also points out that since the African Union (AU) and other regional African organisations have been in existence, there have been ongoing discussions and negotiations on who and how to intervene in an African country in the event of conflict or civil war. Regional action, involving several regions, possibly 'all-African' or even international action, is needed to solve the problems. There is still no established procedure for this, and interventions are often the result of ad hoc agreements between certain interests.

The 2004 conflict in Darfur exemplified this, with Sudan initially rejecting the AU's

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[4] Katharina P. W. Döring is a researcher at the Centre for Baltic and East European Studies (CBEES) at Södertörn University, Stockholm and she is a member of Swedish Defence University, Department of War Studies, Joint Warfare Division. She is part of the CBEES research project 'Continentalism, Geopolitics, and the idea of 'big-space' political formations in comparative historical perspective'. From 2016 to 2019, she worked in the Collaborative Research Centre (SFB 1199) 'Processes of Spatialization under the Global Condition' at Leipzig University, where she explored the value of a space-sensitive perspective for understanding the responses of the African Union and ECWAS towards the conflicts in Mali and the Sahel since 2012. She finished her PhD thesis titled 'Making room for war. The spatialization of African security politics in the quest for African-led military deployment' in June 2019.

intervention but ultimately accepting it to avert international intervention. The establishment of AMIS (African Union Mission in Sudan, AMIS) prevented this, but the AU couldn't manage the peace operation independently due to a lack of funding, equipment, and logistics. As a result, other actors such as the UN, US, EU, and NATO had to participate in conflict management, leading to the establishment of a joint UN-AU hybrid mission. Nevertheless, throughout the intervention, leading African politicians and soldiers have constantly stressed the principle of 'African solutions for African problems', which they have not been able to implement in this mission. I personally 'experienced this first-hand as a logistical advisor seconded by the EU to AMIS staff' (Besenyő, 2021: 147–169).

The book also reflects these ongoing discussions and negotiations in relation to Mali, indicating that African politicians and military leaders often consider several possible solutions in accordance with their interests and often arrive at a single, 'common' solution after several rounds of negotiations (p. 87). Similar to the conflict in Darfur, the failed government in Mali in 2012 prompted the regional political and economic union, ECOWAS, to initiate a regional peace operation (MICEMA/Mission de la CEDEAO au Mali). However, due to the UNSC's lack of endorsement, the AU-led operation AFISMA (African-led International Support Mission in Mali) was given the mandate to resolve the conflict (pp. 70–77). However, the AU was unable to resolve the issue on its own, leading to the deployment of international actors such as the UN (MINUSMA), the EU (EUTM MALI), and the former colonial power in the region, France (Operation Serval, Operation Barkhane) in Mali. The reader can easily follow the discussions, negotiations, and games between ECOWAS, the AU, and the UN that eventually prepared the ground for the military intervention in Mali. They also illustrate one of the author's salient points: 'African military politics are essentially spatial' (p. 34).

In the operation, AFISMA faced similar problems with the AU as in Darfur: the lack of financial and logistical support, the different training of African troops, and the fact that a significant number of African troops and officers did not speak French, which made them unable to interact with the Malian government, the army, and the local population. Consequently, the UN-led MINUSMA operation assimilated the African-led mission here (pp. 75–86). As a reviewer of the book, I cannot help but wonder how the experiences of the AU operations were processed and incorporated into the preparation and training and applied to the new operations. It emerges from Döring's book that success in this area is still to come. However, it's evident that the international actors' operations, while more successful than the AFISMA operation, failed to yield the anticipated outcomes and ultimately ended with another military coup on May 24, 2021 (Amadou & Okur, 2023; El-Ghassim, 2024; Fortin, 2024: 53; Marangio, 2024; Sanaren, 2024).

Although the author does not say so directly, she indicates that, not only in Mali, but in other cases as well, possible African military intervention would have been not only regional but 'all-African', much smoother, more organised, and probably more successful if the African Capacity for Immediate Response to Crises (ACIRC) had been

implemented as originally planned (p. 107). However, several regional organisations and African states—notably Nigeria, which aspires to replace South Africa as the continent's leading power—hindered the establishment and effective functioning of the ACIRC, either perceiving it as a purely South African project or fearing its potential to empower South Africans. The African Standby Force (ASF) merged with the ACIRC in 2019 after years of blocking it, never using it (pp. 87 and 112). Observations in this and other book chapters reveal that some African states view military intervention as a tool to advance their political agendas.

However, upon reading the book, it becomes clear that not only has the 'all-African' solution failed in Mali, but regional cooperation has also failed to yield tangible results. One of the reasons is that Mali is a member of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), and the regional organisation has been trying to find solutions for the terrorist groups that threaten Mali's security and the region. However, it quickly became clear that non-ECOWAS countries like Algeria, Mauritania, Libya, and Chad should also engage in cooperation with Mali. However, despite some positive developments, cooperation has not been particularly successful due to different and often conflicting interests. This can be seen from the decision to set up the Nouakchott Process Intervention Force within the Nouakchott Process, which 'never made it past the planning stage' and was never actually deployed (pp. 137–143).

The author also criticizes the G5 Sahel Joint Force, which Burkina Faso, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, and Chad established and operated. Despite strong international support, primarily from the EU, the US, and France, the force has not achieved any breakthrough success against terrorist groups in the region. In fact, following the coup in Mali, the country withdrew from the organization and expelled French troops from its territory (pp. 143–144, 159–161). The three countries formed the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) in the place of the G5 Sahel, whose objectives were largely identical to those of the G5 Sahel. Chad and Mauritania then decided to dissolve the G5 Sahel (Doukhan, 2024).

In the final chapter, Döring concludes and examines African military politics, highlighting its strengths and weaknesses. According to the author, the question of how African political and military leaders will be able to assert their interests and succeed on the continent will clearly be a crucial one in the future (pp. 188–189).

The book's strength is that the author not only drew on a large body of relevant literature but also spent a lot of time in Sahel countries, where she interviewed 143 people who were involved in the creation and operation of African Military Politics and those who implemented it on the ground. As part of the oral history, these interviews provide a considerable amount of additional information, especially in cases where relatively little relevant archival data is available on a given topic (due to confidentiality or other reasons), thus making the research more robust.

Reading this very topical and comprehensive book, we can learn a great deal about the military background and policies of regional organizations and countries on the African continent, as well as their links to each other and international politics. It can

significantly contribute to our understanding of African political processes and provides a basis for security, international, and other analyses of the Sahel countries. All those interested in the continent and region from any angle should read this book.

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Book review: Jeremiah O. Asaka, Alice A. Oluoko-Odingo: Human Security and Sustainable Development in East Africa[1][2]

Szilvia Veress Juhászné[3]

Jeremiah O. Asaka and Alice A. Oluoko-Odingo wrote their book in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, in collaboration with a number of renowned experts on human security and sustainable development in Africa. Routledge published this ground-breaking multidisciplinary approach to the concept of human security in 2022.

The authors are Jeremiah O. Asaka and Alice A. Oluoko-Odingo. Dr. Asaka is an assistant professor of Security Studies in the Department of Security Studies at Sam Houston State University. His teaching and research activities focus primarily in the area of security studies, with a special emphasis on human security, environmental security, and sustainability. Dr. Asaka pays particular attention to the interrelationships between human and environmental security, especially in developing countries. His research often examines the impacts of climate change, natural resource management, and environmental conflict and its effects on societies. It aims to contribute to sustainable development and the promotion of global security. Alice A. Oluoko-Odingo, the associate professor of Geography and Environmental Studies in the Department of Geography, Population and Environmental Studies at the University of Nairobi, specialises in environmental science, geography, and population studies, with a particular focus on sustainability and environmental change.

Dr. Oluoko-Odingo's work focuses on the study of climate change impacts, sustainable development issues, and natural resource management. His research often focuses on the social and economic impacts of climate change, particularly on rural communities and vulnerable populations. She is the National Coordinator of the United Nations' University and Partner Universities Program on Education for Sustainable Development in Africa (ESDA).

The main chapters present an in-depth analysis of human security issues and sustainable development challenges in the East African region. Acknowledged experts in the field, the authors offer a comprehensive overview of the region's complex problems and propose sustainable solutions.

The book focuses on the concept of human security, which includes the security of individuals and communities from a variety of threats, such as conflicts between peoples,

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ethnic groups, nations, regions, poverty, food safety and security, health challenges, and environmental threats. The authors describe in detail how these factors affect daily life and social stability in East Africa. In several chapters, they illustrate the intricacy of human security, showing how it differs from military security and necessitates consideration from various perspectives.

Sustainable development is a daily challenge of our times. The book stresses the importance of sustainable development in the context of human security, which seeks to achieve a balance between economic growth, social well-being, and environmental sustainability. It presents existing sustainable development strategies and programs in the region and analyses their effectiveness and challenges. It discusses in detail environmental issues such as climate change, natural resource depletion, and biodiversity loss and shows how these problems affect human security and sustainable development.

Among the factors affecting human security, the authors also highlight political instability and economic and gender inequalities, which have a significant impact on the security and development of the region. The authors analyse the role of different government policies and international cooperation in addressing these challenges.

In addition to clarifying the extensive conceptual framework of human security, the book aims to provide a comprehensive overview of the human security and sustainable development challenges facing East Africa and practical recommendations. The authors highlight the importance of engaging local communities and the role of international cooperation and support for development in the region.

The 13-chapter book begins with a chapter on the structure of the book, followed by a detailed section exploring the concept of human security, in which the author strongly emphasises the close link between human security and sustainable development.

In the following chapters, the authors support the hypothesis that sustainable development fundamentally determines human security by reviewing the literature on specific issues and/or concrete case studies. Thus, Chapter 3 details the impact of Somali refugees on Kenya's economy, society, and, by extension, its human security. It discusses the link between human insecurity (low levels) and the process of radicalization, which can ultimately lead individuals to join terrorist organizations—further exacerbating human insecurity. It is thus a circular process, with elements generating each other.

Chapter 4 also discusses Somali refugees and Kenya and Uganda's refugee responses. The author points out that it is the long-term stay of refugees that poses a major challenge to host communities. The author of the chapter argues that for both refugees and host communities, a transformation of refugee policy in a way that develops self-sufficiency programmes for refugees, harmonised with the needs of local residents, would offer a chance for sustainable living. The author suggests a perspective on refugee arrivals that could potentially address some of the challenges faced by host communities, ensuring that they not only contribute to the community but also enhance it. The chapter stresses that the possibility of resilience could be provided through the introduction of various integration programmes. Aid is not a solution to the long-term

presence of refugees, but only a complex strategy to ensure their integration and self-sufficiency can address the situation, which is fundamental to the peaceful coexistence of migrants and local residents.

The chapter analyses the management of Somali refugees in Kenya and Uganda in the form of a case study. The geopolitical situation of the two countries is a key factor in the relationship with Somali refugees, as Somalia borders Kenya directly, and the access of refugees to Uganda is more complicated. The author explains that there are a significant number of Somali refugees in Uganda, some of whom have come from Kenya due to mistreatment there. The chapter outlines Uganda's efforts to formulate a refugee policy based on liberal principles, which aims to attract refugees to the country. In analysing Kenya's relationship with Somali refugees, the author argues that the large numbers of refugees and their long-term stay place a heavy burden on host communities and that there is a clear negative attitude towards refugees among the population. Locals perceive the refugee camps inhabited by Somalis as a breeding ground for radicalism, which in turn fosters the development of terrorism, particularly in light of the increase in terrorist attacks. This attitude further complicates efforts to integrate refugees. Overall, the author argues in this chapter that complex refugee policies that support refugee integration can ensure the human security of refugee host communities, taking into account the case studies, general refugee policy, and economic and social perspectives.

In Chapter 5, the authors emphasise the importance, relevance, and complexity of human security by exploring the causes of recurring conflicts in South Sudan. The authors present human security as nothing less than the only means to peace in the region. In their analysis of the conflicts in South Sudan, the authors conclude that the failure of several peace agreements in the region is due to the parties' lack of full engagement in creating the conditions for peace. Moreover, there is a deficiency in a comprehensive human security strategy that aims to eradicate poverty, uphold and ensure fundamental human rights, and eliminate discrimination and social inequalities. The authors argue that the only way to promote peace is to establish human security, taking into account the collective interests of both the individual and the state.

The impact of individual rights on human security will be discussed below, but in addition to the rights most frequently mentioned in international practice, it will also address a less often touched upon area: the right to land. Chapter 6 examines the issue of land rights in Tanzanian and Ethiopian practice. The aim of the chapter is to draw attention to the fact that the issue of land rights has the potential to fundamentally determine the level of human security. In addition to food and clothing, the author mentions 'shelter', i.e., land and ownership of land, as one of the basic conditions of life. The chapter highlights the problems of land rights in Tanzania and Ethiopia by presenting specific cases. The state wields the most power over land tenure in these two countries, frequently depriving individuals of their land, just like in other parts of the world. This practice results in immediate insecurity for the individual and their family, particularly if the land previously served as a source of livelihood. Smallholder

subsistence farming, which is prevalent throughout Africa, forms the foundation of household livelihoods. Depriving households of land can in fact push the masses into livelihood insecurity, as most of them cannot afford to feed their families with market products. Food security is the most basic element of human security, and its absence creates additional problems that threaten human security at other levels.

On the issue of land tenure rights, the author proposes that the incentive of the international community is the key to addressing land tenure rights. African countries that neglect individual rights in land tenure issues need to develop legal practices that align with the principles outlined in international human security conventions and agreements. The author argues that a major incentive for reforming land distribution practices and transposing international recommendations into law could be the accountability of land rights policy institutions. In this way, there is an opportunity to regulate not only the two African countries discussed in this chapter but also land rights issues in other regions of the world, thus contributing to reducing human insecurity.

Rwanda serves as an example to illustrate the connections between economic development and human security. In Chapter 7, the author outlines Rwanda's tangible efforts and aspirations toward ensuring human security following the 1994 Tuzhou genocide, recognizing the inseparable link between economic development and human security. The country's Vision 2020 human security programme has now been updated and will continue to be known as Vision 2050. The National Strategy of Transformation was successfully implemented between 2017 and 2024. The chapter concludes that, although there are still significant disparities in human security among certain groups in Rwanda's society, efforts to achieve it have been successful and are expected to continue to improve.

The author presents a system of human security in Rwanda based on three pillars: economic security, food security, and health security. The author presents Rwanda's efforts to eradicate unemployment and reduce the poverty rate, which include the introduction of business loans and direct subsidies. In the area of food security, Rwanda is integrating into its programme a response to climate change, and in the area of health security, Rwanda is taking full account of the importance of the cooperation and collaboration seen during the COVID-19 pandemic. The author's analysis of Rwanda's situation reveals the need for further individual-level research, despite the country's overall success in achieving human security. Achieving human security does not only mean having the basic security factors in place but also ending the fear of not having them.

The authors further demonstrate the close links between health, food, and economic security in Chapter 8, where they address a common problem in the East African region, namely the contamination of certain food groups with aflatoxins. The region’s warm, humid climate is particularly favourable for the proliferation of fungi that produce aflatoxins. Aspergillus fungi produce toxins in maize, lentils, rice, sorghum, wheat, and potatoes, as well as in primarily export-orientated foods like coffee, tea, peanuts, and various spices.

Aflatoxin not only directly affects health safety by causing immunosuppression, jaundice, liver damage, acute liver failure, liver cancer, and even death, but it also indirectly contributes to the development and escalation of human insecurity by decreasing the competitiveness of contaminated food in the market. As in the previous chapters, the authors strongly emphasise that, although military security is the typical focus of human security in the East African region, the examination of other factors is also of utmost importance and that a multidisciplinary approach to human security is essential. In formulating their recommendations, the authors positively assess the established testing methods for aflatoxin contamination control in the East African region and recommend further development, including routine testing at the household level. Recommendations are made to identify and further investigate specific vulnerabilities and, on this basis, to develop action plans to reduce aflatoxin contamination.

For the East African region as a whole, the role of government policies in human security is crucial, as Chapter 9 demonstrates. While governments often aim to ensure military security, they also design policy institutions to address other aspects of human security, including the pressing issue of environmental security, which is an integral part of it. The author analyses in detail the critical role of governance in environmental security and discusses the place of governance in the creation of environmental security. The first part of the chapter provides a review of the relevant literature, while the second part analyses the results of interviews with researchers, government policymakers, security practitioners, and civil society actors. The author highlights the food and environmental security challenges posed by climate change, specifically in the East African region. He highlights the strong potential of governance to influence human security through environmental security, provided that it can create the legal and institutional policy frameworks for the exercise of environmental security practices.

Climate change poses a global challenge to all aspects of human security, and the authors of the following chapters—Chapters 10 and 11—accentuate the novel, complex approach to human security as a multidisciplinary field. Chapter 10's theme, which explores the relationship between Kenya's roads and climate change and its impact on the human security of the Kenyan population, highlights the complexity of human security. The author highlights the fact that roads are critical infrastructure elements that fundamentally determine access to education, health care, jobs, and markets—in effect, major elements of human security—by describing the state of Kenya's roads. The author shows that Kenya's generally inadequate roads are often impassable due to unpredictable weather conditions resulting from climate change, preventing access to some of the essential elements of human security just listed. The author formulates specific links between poor regions in Kenya and poor roads, drawing on primary data from country-conducted research and information from interviewees involved in the study.

Chapter 11, which provides some evidence of climate change, explores the visible signs of it in the East African region over the past four decades. Drawing mainly on a

literature review, it demonstrates a clear link between climate change, food security, and sustainable development. It draws attention to the complexity of human security and the importance of a new approach to it.

The last two chapters of the book illustrate the link between urbanisation and human security through examples of two East African cities: Kampala, Uganda, and Nairobi, Kenya. While Kampala is facing the challenges of so-called internal migration within the country, Nairobi is struggling with those posed by foreign migrants. But the end result is the same in both regions: growing human insecurity (including declining food and health security).

In Chapter 12, the authors dedicate the first part to defining human security, followed by a detailed analysis of the links between urbanization, housing, and human security, using the case of Kampala. They describe how the population of Kampala, Uganda's administrative and commercial centre, is growing at a tremendous rate, with rural populations seeking to settle in the city in search of better livelihoods and employment opportunities. The chapter shows how Kampala's urban planning is struggling to cope with the influx of people and housing, with the result that people are settling on the outskirts of the city. This rapidly growing population is creating informal settlements, which is a fundamental challenge to human security in these settlements.

Kampala's geographical location presents a significant challenge, with valleys surrounding the city on all sides and water-near habitats bordering it. Construction significantly affects the condition of wetlands surrounding the city and the quality of water, placing the population of informal settlements built on wetlands at significant risk of flooding. Overcrowding, water pollution, and periodic floods increase the risk of disease, damage to buildings, and make food production impossible. Inadequate transport facilities make it difficult to access health care, education, markets, and jobs, which are essential elements of human security. The authors conduct a detailed analysis of the situation and recommend changes to urban planning, plot sizes, and building construction methods.

The increasing number and size of informal settlements is also evident in the neighbouring Kenyan capital, Nairobi. The author of the last chapter, Chapter 13, argues that the Kenyan capital is a sample city for research on the relationship between urbanisation and migration. High levels of foreign immigration, in addition to urbanisation within the country, burden the city, leading to the development of crowded informal settlements on its outskirts. The author highlights that high population growth presents significant challenges for health, education, and employment. It also complicates transportation, thereby limiting access to jobs, health care, and markets. Consequently, the instability of human security in the city and its surrounding settlements will lead to an increase in crime.

Exploring and analysing in detail human security issues in East Africa through concrete case studies, this book provides a clear and understandable picture of the region as a whole and of specific areas with specific challenges by explaining cause and effect in a logical way. By delving into the concept of human security from various perspectives, it

becomes evident that it is far more intricate than it initially appears. Unlike previous interpretations, it does not equate to military security, which is merely one aspect of human security. For instance, hunger can trigger migration, and migration processes can lead to famine in a refugee-stricken region, thereby generating health challenges, contributing to radicalisation, and ultimately leading to armed conflict. Consequently, famine and migration can result in a complex web of interlinkages that impact human security.

The volume is not only useful for experts dealing with the challenges of the African continent but also for researchers and professionals working in any area of human security, including economic, health, environmental, and educational sectors, engineers, and even politicians. This is because ensuring human security is a multifaceted task that requires a multidisciplinary approach and a complex perspective. The authors of this volume highlight connections that allow the reader to simultaneously perceive the local and global interrelations and direct or indirect interactions among healthcare, trade, law, politics, nature conservation, and even military affairs. This perspective is essential for any professional working toward ensuring human security.

Book review: Handbook of Terrorist and Insurgent Groups: A Global Survey of Threats, Tactics, and Characteristics[1][2]

Gábor Sinkó[3]

The Handbook of Terrorist and Insurgency Groups: A Global Survey of Threats, Tactics, and Characteristics provides a comprehensive overview of some of the most active and influential terrorist and insurgent organisations globally. Delving into the ideological underpinnings, operational strategies, and distinctive characteristics of groups such as al-Qaeda, the Islamic State, Boko Haram, and others, this handbook sheds light on the evolution and metamorphosis of these entities over time. It also explores their ties to international jihadist networks, providing valuable insights into the interconnected nature of modern terrorism.

Authored by more than fifty experts in the field and from countries around the world, this handbook employs a multi-faceted approach to dissecting the complex phenomena of terrorism and insurgency. By combining conceptual frameworks with regional analyses and case studies while drawing on an immense amount of primary and secondary data, the book strives to deepen our understanding of the key dynamics driving these violent movements. One of the central themes explored in the handbook is the response of nation-states to combating terrorism. Through 81 chapters across nine sections, the handbook outlines the various counter-terrorism tactics employed by governments to thwart the activities of terrorist and insurgent groups. By scrutinising the strategies and effectiveness of state responses, one of the advantages of the handbook is that it offers a nuanced perspective on the ongoing struggle against terrorism.

The book seeks to illuminate the political, economic, and social factors influencing the formation and modus operandi of terrorist and insurgent groups. By examining the social, political, and economic contexts in which these groups emerge, the book provides a holistic view of the root causes of terrorism. It underscores the importance of addressing these underlying issues to effectively tackle the scourge of violent extremism. The handbook also delves into propaganda and recruitment methods. It highlights how terrorist organisations leverage modern communication tools and social

[1] DOI: https://doi.org/10.59569/jceeas.2024.4.2.339

[2] Scott N. Romaniuk, Animesh Roul, Amparo Pamela Fabe, János Besenyő (eds.): Handbook of Terrorist and Insurgent Groups: A Global Survey of Threats, Tactics, and Characteristics by, CRC Press, 2024, 784 Pages 34 B/W Illustrations, ISBN: 9781032714905.

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media platforms to disseminate their messages, attract new recruits, and incite fear. By understanding the propaganda machinery of these groups, policymakers and security experts can devise more targeted countermeasures to combat their influence.

The handbook highlights the evolving nature of terrorism in the technological era. The fact that radicalised individuals may find a wealth of information online, including how to make bombs and extremist views, highlights the dangers faced by lone-wolf terrorists. To combat the proliferation of violent extremism on the internet, it discusses the importance of counter-narratives and more robust cybersecurity measures. Through a series of case studies and in-depth analyses, the handbook offers a nuanced portrayal of the diverse landscape of terrorist and insurgent groups. By examining the strategic goals, organisational structures, and external support networks of these entities, the book provides a comprehensive overview of the global terrorist threat.

It discusses the various forms of insurgencies and terrorist attacks that have occurred on the African continent, particularly in North, Central, and Eastern Africa. The book highlights the increasing trend of such activities and the geographical expansion of terror groups in these regions. The chapters delve into prominent terrorist organisations like al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), al-Shabaab, Boko Haram, and the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), showcasing their geographical spread and influence. Additionally, it mentions specific groups, like Ansar al-Din, operating in Mali with aspirations to expand into Mauritania and the Ivory Coast, emphasising their ties with AQIM and their role within the broader al-Qaeda 'coalition' in Africa.

The Handbook of Terrorist and Insurgency Groups serves as a valuable resource for academics, policymakers, and security practitioners seeking to deepen their understanding of contemporary terrorism. By synthesising cutting-edge research and expert insights, this handbook equips readers with the knowledge and tools necessary to confront the challenges posed by terrorist and insurgent groups in the 21st century. Although the dedicated section on analysing case studies in Africa is commendable, a handbook that solely addresses African terrorist organisations and insurgencies would be highly beneficial.

Book review: Wolfram Lacher & Virginie Collombier (eds.). (2023). Violence and Social Transformation in Libya[1][2]

András Málnássy[3]

Violence has transformed Libyan society in many ways since the 2011 Arab Spring-inspired uprising. The collapse of the Libyan government's use of violence has had far-reaching implications on all aspects of social relations. The authors of 'Violence and Social Transformation in Libya', a valuable and informative book, assert that acute violent conflict has shaped new political identities, drawn deep societal rifts between and within regions and communities, propelled the rise of new elites, and remade gender relations and generational hierarchies.

The changes Libyan society has undergone over the past decade prompt the book's main question, whether violent conflict deeply transforms social relations in Libya. The answer is that unambiguous, long-standing violent conflict has far-reaching implications for society. The use and threat of violence create new social relations, transforming loyalties, hierarchies, group boundaries, and identities. At the same time, according to the findings of the research, the transformation of social relations during conflict can help reveal the power relations that held the pre-war social order. Furthermore, the authors pose the question: how can a decade of violent conflict and weakened central authority transform a society, and what insights can we draw from the Libyan experience to answer this question? The purpose of this meaningful book is to analyze the transformations that Libyan society has undergone since 2011.

In Libya since 2011, alliances and enmities have changed dramatically from one phase of the conflict to the next. Since 2011, the state's monopoly on violence has dissolved, leading to relative stability in some localities, prolonged insecurity in others, and the violent rise of armed local actors seeking to establish control in others. Examining the overall links between violence and social change in a specific conflict reveals various types of effects. Violence features in this research: both the changing distribution of control over the means of violence and the violent conflict between protagonists competing for power. The research concludes that the collapse of a monopoly on violence provokes a re-ordering across domains ranging from social capital or the religious sphere to identity politics. The authors identify three distinct types of effects in violent conflict that transform social relations.

The collapse of a particular distribution of control over the means of violence enables

[1] DOI: https://doi.org/10.59569/jceeas.2024.4.2.238

[2] Wolfram Lacher & Virginie Collombier (eds.). (2023). *Violence and Social Transformation in Libya*. London: Hurst Publishers. ISBN: 9781787389427.

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change across a wide range of domains, including political and religious discourse. The other aspect is that the use or threat of violence alters social relations. Violence serves the immediate purpose of establishing and maintaining a new order. The third effect is that, in some cases, violence can foster social change. Changes in the distribution of control over the means of violence render social transformation across a wide range of domains. The use of violence creates and maintains new social relations in ways that are both temporary and irreversible, and these developments have second-order effects that lead to further social change. These effects, mentioned above, interact with each other, so tracing them requires close and complex observation, which this research has completely fulfilled.

Emadeddin Badi posited that socialization through violence within the context of a popular revolution differs significantly from socialization through an ongoing civil war. In the immediate aftermath of the revolution, Libya witnessed an unprecedented opening of its civic space and the holding of democratic elections, giving youth a voice in shaping their future and preferred governance blueprints. This reduced the incentive for this generation to retain its presence in the militarized space that became the revolution's legacy. The conflict not only disillusioned many young people with the revolution they had spearheaded; the unfolding violence also socialized an even younger generation. Since then, they are contending with institutional crackdowns on the civic space. The mediums for self-expression that were available to their older counterparts are no longer available to them.

Rima Ibrahim indicated that the 2011 revolution opened a field for women to engage in political and civil activism that had previously been impossible. It also enabled women to enter the public sphere for exercise. However, women's irruption into the public sphere rapidly brought about a backlash. Following the revolution, the political sphere excluded women, prompting calls to restrict their role to the private sphere. Women's exclusion from leadership and policy-making positions necessitated their increased participation in the social and economic arena. Women have ventured into previously male-only professions and established home-based businesses. Women have had to contend with the interplay of two key factors: insecurity and mechanisms of social control, whose severity has increased since 2011 due to security fears. The author emphasized that family-related fears have sustained efforts to enforce gender segregation and confine women to private spaces, and the growing influence of hardline religious currents since 2011 has compounded social control. Worsening economic conditions pushed women to take on new roles as they sought to seize the opportunities presented by the 2011 revolution. At the same time, opportunities for political and military mobilization led to the rise of armed groups and hardline religious actors who countered women's attempts to claim new roles.

Conflict has completely transformed Benghazi, as Mary Fitzgerald discovered in her research. The 2014–18 war's social and economic dynamics not only upended the previous status quo but also sparked the emergence of new identities among most Benghazi residents and those who opposed the operation and faced expulsion.

According to the author, certain narratives of the conflict, including those that reinforce a regionalist sentiment bordering on separatism, appear to have shaped a more brittle sense of identity among the city's younger generation. Future generations are likely to echo down the new social and economic realities shaped by the war and now deeply embedded in the city's fabric.

Virginie Collombier and Misbah Omar's chapter has sought to unpack both the social origins and the consequences for society of the violence that accompanied that conflict. Unresolved questions over political order in the post-Qadhafi era, particularly over security sector governance, sparked the war, along with debates about the redeemability of the old system. The subsequent rise of radicalism on both sides resulted in a weaponisation of social divides. Violent incidents were rarely pre-planned or deliberately contrived. Aggressive actors, who had previously held inconsistent grievances, seized upon violent incidents once they occurred. It became easier for these actors to advance a simpler, clearer, and more motivating narrative, orchestrating a new violence offensive that almost always rested on a new interpretation of the past. According to the author, the immediate origins of this spiral lie in the assassinations led by radical Islamists in 2012 and 2013. Operation Dignity did a lot to intensify this social violence by harnessing it via tribal and neighborhood paramilitary forces.

Wolfram Lacher clearly concluded that fundamental aspects of Libya's public sector remained constant beyond Qadhafi's demise. State employment continued to provide the raw material with which to build patronage networks, while considerations of productivity and the actual need for employees remained secondary. Many public servants continued to supplement their salaries by moonlighting in the formal and informal private sectors. After 2011, the bureaucracy's cogs remained largely unchanged, allowing one to benefit from their prior expertise in manipulating them. The vanishing of the central arbiter in patronage distribution triggered momentous changes. Local armed groups and civil servants within their spheres of influence formed patron-client relationships, while lower-level bureaucrats without clear links to armed actors established these relationships. In most cases, the insecurity of Libya's rapidly changing military landscape made it difficult for them to consolidate.

Christopher Thornton highlighted that in 2014, the international community sought to establish functioning elected institutions through the House of Representatives (HoR). This overlooked the fact that the HoR had limited political authority and was merely one political actor among many. The mediation process that produced the Libyan Political Agreement grew out of this approach. This process failed to reflect the distribution of power within Libyan society. Consequently, it was not implementable in eastern Libya and produced negative externalities in western Libya by forcing the new political authorities into a subservient relationship with militias in the capital. During the period between 2016 and 2019, the international community was frustrated with the fragmentation of Libyan society and desperately wanted a simpler solution, so it advanced the prospects of a bilateral deal between Fayez al-Sarraj and Khalifa Haftar. However, this approach overlooked the fact that Sarraj was a weak leader and that

Haftar had no interest in a political settlement.

Millions of Libyans fled their homes in the decade after the collapse of the Qadhafi regime in the autumn of 2011. At least 300,000 Libyans sought refuge in Tunisia, and by 2022, reports indicated that a million were residing in Egypt. The country internally displaced around 1,400,000 people in various locations. Thousands of Libyans died as a result of military operations; for instance, airstrikes alone took 1,100 lives between 2012 and 2022. The book illustrates very well that the disintegration of central authority is an important feature of Libya's experience of violence. In the Libyan civil war, there are not two sides but many contestants—some groups hoping to command the public administration, some aspiring to build new political structures. The research demonstrates that Libyan youth are vulnerable to the consequences of decades of conflict, political instability, poor governance, and violence. The most severe problem is that unemployment, poor quality education, and youth exclusion, on the one hand, put young people at risk of recruitment into violent groups and illicit activities, while militias, on the other hand, appeal to them in terms of income, power, and security.

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