

**TERRORISM AND COUNTER-TERRORISM IN THE SAHEL REGION 2005-  
2025**

**BY**

**AGBONIFO DESMOND OMOROGIE  
ART2100655**

**DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES  
FACULTY OF ARTS  
UNIVERSITY OF BENIN  
BENIN CITY**

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## **CERTIFICATION**

This is to certify that this project was carried out by **AGBONIFO DESMOND OMOROGIE** with Matriculation Number **ART2100655** in the Department of History and International Studies, University of Benin, under my supervision.

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**Miss Osarenoma Omoruyi**  
**Supervisor**

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**Prof. J.C Nwaka**  
**Head of Department**

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**Date:**

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**Date**

## **DEDICATION**

This work is wholeheartedly dedicated to Almighty God, the source of my strength, wisdom, and inspiration. Without His boundless grace, mercy, and guidance, this achievement would not have been possible. To Him be all the glory, honor, and praise. It is also dedicated to my loving family for their constant encouragement and support, and to all who strive tirelessly for peace, justice, and stability in the Sahel region.

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# CHAPTER ONE

## BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

### **Introduction**

The Sahel region is a semi-arid belt stretching across Africa south of the Sahara Desert, and has in recent decades become one of the world's most volatile and insecure regions. It comprises states such as Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, Chad, Mauritania, and parts of Nigeria. Between 2005 and 2025, the Sahel has witnessed a rapid escalation of terrorist activities and violent extremism, primarily linked to the spread of jihadist ideologies and the collapse of effective governance structures in key states. The increasing fragility of Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso has created a fertile environment for extremist movements such as Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM), and several local militias to thrive.<sup>1</sup>

The rise of terrorism in the Sahel is closely tied to the political and socio-economic instability that has plagued these countries. In Mali, for instance, the Tuareg rebellion of 2012 and the subsequent coup d'état provided the pretext for terrorist groups to seize control of vast territories in the north.<sup>2</sup> In Niger and Burkina Faso, porous borders, weak military capacity, and economic deprivation have created opportunities for jihadist infiltration and radicalization of local populations.<sup>3</sup> Terrorism has not only led to massive human casualties and displacement but has also undermined state authority and regional development.

Counter-terrorism efforts in the Sahel have evolved significantly over the past two decades. Regional initiatives such as the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) and the G5 Sahel Joint Force, supported by France, the United States, and the European Union, have sought to combat terrorist networks through military coordination, intelligence sharing, and capacity building.<sup>4</sup> However, despite these efforts, terrorism continues to expand geographically, moving from northern Mali to central regions and into western Niger and northern Burkina Faso. The persistence of terrorist violence reveals that a purely military approach is insufficient without addressing the structural causes of instability — such as poverty, governance failure, and ethnic marginalization.<sup>5</sup>

The period between 2005 and 2025 marks a turning point in the evolution of terrorism in the Sahel. Early forms of militancy that began as smuggling and banditry have transformed into complex, ideologically motivated insurgencies with transnational connections.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, the withdrawal of French troops in 2022 and the subsequent rise of Russian influence, particularly through the Wagner Group, have reshaped the counter-terrorism landscape.<sup>7</sup> This dynamic interplay between local grievances and global jihadist agendas has made the Sahel both a regional and international security concern.

The study of terrorism and counter-terrorism in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso during this period is crucial for understanding the broader implications of violent extremism in Africa. Terrorism has devastated local economies, displaced millions, and weakened governance structures, while counter-terrorism interventions have raised

debates about sovereignty, human rights, and the role of external actors.<sup>8</sup> The present research therefore seeks to examine the root causes, manifestations, and responses to terrorism in the Sahel between 2005 and 2025, with a particular emphasis on the experiences of Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso.

### **Aim and Objectives of the Study**

The aim of this study is to analyze the evolution of terrorism and the corresponding counter-terrorism responses in the Sahel region from 2005 to 2025, with a focus on Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso.

The specific objectives are to:

1. Examine the historical and political origins of terrorism in the Sahel region.
2. Identify the major terrorist organizations and their operational dynamics between 2005 and 2025.
3. Assess the strategies and effectiveness of regional and international counter-terrorism efforts.
4. Evaluate the socio-economic and political impacts of terrorism on Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso.
5. Suggest sustainable approaches for improving counter-terrorism outcomes and long-term stability in the region.

### **Scope of the Study**

The study focuses primarily on the tri-border area comprising Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso — the epicenter of terrorism in the Sahel between 2005 and 2025.

Although other Sahelian states such as Chad and Mauritania have also faced security threats, the selected countries represent the most severely affected and interlinked cases. The study covers a twenty-year period to allow for an examination of the progression, patterns, and policy responses to terrorism over time.

## **Methodology**

This research adopts a qualitative analytical approach complemented by descriptive and comparative methods. Data were gathered through documentary analysis of official reports, policy briefs, and academic literature. Content analysis was employed to interpret trends in terrorist incidents and counter-terrorism interventions across the three states. The materials for this study are sourced from both primary and secondary data.

**Primary Sources:** Primary data were obtained from interviews and field reports of security agencies, policy statements by government officials, and communiqués of international organizations such as the African Union (AU), ECOWAS, and the United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel (UNOWAS). Reports from the G5 Sahel Secretariat and direct statements from ministries of defense in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso were also examined.

**Secondary Sources:** Secondary data were drawn from scholarly books, peer-reviewed journal articles, think-tank publications (e.g., International Crisis Group, Institute for Security Studies), and online databases such as JSTOR and Taylor & Francis Online.

These materials provided insights into the theoretical, historical, and empirical dimensions of terrorism in the Sahel.

## **Literature Review**

Scholarly works on terrorism in the Sahel reveal a growing consensus that weak governance and socio-economic marginalization are the primary enablers of violent extremism.

Alex Thurston, in his book entitled, *Jihadists of North Africa and the Sahel: Local Politics and Rebel Groups*,<sup>9</sup> explores the intersection between local politics and militant Islamism in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso. He argues that jihadist groups such as Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) have successfully embedded themselves within local conflicts by exploiting grievances rooted in governance failures and ethnic exclusion. According to Thurston, terrorism in the Sahel is not merely a foreign import but a localized phenomenon that feeds on decades of political marginalization and corruption.

Abdourahmane Idrissa, in his book entitled, *Politics of Islam in the Sahel: Between Revivalism and Jihadism*,<sup>10</sup> explains that the expansion of violent extremism in Niger is largely the result of the state's inability to reconcile Islamic revival movements with secular governance. Idrissa emphasizes that the government's historical neglect of pastoralist communities, especially the Fulani and Tuareg, created a climate of frustration that extremist preachers later exploited. He notes that religious identity in the Sahel often

masks deeper social and economic inequalities, making counter-terrorism efforts that ignore these realities ineffective.

Baz Lecocq and Georg Klute, in their book entitled, *Tuareg Separatism in Mali*,<sup>11</sup> analyze the transformation of local Tuareg rebellions into broader jihadist movements. They show that the 2012 Malian crisis was not an isolated event but the culmination of long-standing struggles over autonomy, resources, and political representation. Lecocq and Klute argue that jihadist groups such as AQIM capitalized on the chaos of the rebellion to forge alliances with disillusioned Tuareg fighters, thereby creating a hybrid insurgency that fused separatism with global jihadist ideology.

Marc-Antoine Pérouse de Montclos, in his book entitled, *Understanding Political Violence in Africa*,<sup>12</sup> situates Sahelian terrorism within the broader context of African political instability. He argues that the Sahel's terrorism problem reflects a structural crisis of governance, where state institutions are too weak to deliver justice, services, or security. Montclos criticizes Western counter-terrorism policies for treating the Sahel as a purely military theater, overlooking the social dynamics that sustain insurgency. He insists that without institutional reforms, counter-terrorism efforts will only produce cyclical violence.

Susanna Wing, in her book entitled, *French Intervention in Mali: A Historical and Political Perspective*,<sup>13</sup> provides an in-depth analysis of France's military operations — Operation Serval and Operation Barkhane. She maintains that while these interventions temporarily displaced terrorist groups, they also reinforced Mali's

dependency on external powers. Wing contends that the narrow focus on counter-insurgency tactics ignored the underlying issues of state legitimacy and governance that continue to fuel extremism.

Morten Bøås and Liv Elin Torheim, in their book entitled, *Sahel Crisis and the Politics of Security*,<sup>14</sup> explore the regionalization of insecurity and the complex relationships among state actors, militias, and local communities. They highlight how state militarization, driven by donor funding and international pressure, has deepened the alienation of rural populations. According to them, the securitization of development has blurred the line between civilian protection and military objectives, thereby undermining trust between governments and citizens.

Denis M. Tull in his book entitled, in *Russia and the Changing Geopolitics of the Sahel*,<sup>15</sup> examines the shifting power dynamics following the reduction of France's influence and the growing presence of Russia, particularly through the Wagner Group. Tull suggests that the realignment of alliances in the Sahel reflects not only geopolitical competition but also the search by local regimes for new sources of legitimacy and military support. He warns that such partnerships may entrench authoritarianism rather than strengthen counter-terrorism outcomes.

Olivier Walther in his book entitled, *African Border Disorders: Addressing Transnational Extremism*,<sup>16</sup> underscores that terrorism in the Sahel thrives on porous borders and cross-border social networks. He argues that jihadist groups exploit the fluid mobility of traders, herders, and migrants, transforming regional frontiers into zones of

recruitment and refuge. Walther advocates for cross-border cooperation rooted in community engagement rather than military coercion.

Stig Jarle Hansen in his book entitled, *Horn, Sahel and Rift: Fault-Lines of the African Jihad*,<sup>17</sup> situates the Sahel within the broader African jihadist landscape. He identifies ideological linkages between jihadist movements in the Horn of Africa and those in the Sahel, emphasizing how transnational networks share tactics, funding channels, and propaganda. Hansen notes that local grievances remain the primary drivers of recruitment, but these are often amplified by the global narratives of Jihad.

Mathieu Pellerin in his book entitled, *Armed Groups in the Sahel: Beyond the Myths*,<sup>18</sup> challenges the prevailing perception that terrorism in the region is solely religiously motivated. Pellerin shows that many so-called jihadist fighters are driven by economic necessity, revenge, or protection rather than ideology. He calls for a nuanced understanding of these groups, emphasizing the need for governance reforms and reconciliation processes over militarized responses.

Alex Thurston in his book entitled, *Jihadists of North Africa and the Sahel: Local Politics and Rebel Groups*,<sup>19</sup> extensively discussed on the evolution of jihadist movements in the Sahel provides one of the most insightful frameworks for understanding terrorism in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso. Thurston argues that the rise of extremist groups such as Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) and Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) cannot be separated from the deep-rooted political marginalization, poor governance, and military abuses that characterize the region. He emphasizes that rather

than being purely ideological, these movements thrive on pre-existing grievances between local communities and central governments. In Mali, for instance, Thurston observes that the 2012 rebellion and subsequent collapse of state authority provided fertile ground for extremist recruitment and consolidation. The inability of the Malian government to effectively integrate Tuareg communities into national politics and the persistent neglect of peripheral regions created a vacuum that jihadist leaders skillfully exploited.

Stig Jarle Hansen, *Horn, Sahel, and Rift: Fault-Lines of the African Jihad*,<sup>20</sup> explores the transnational dimension of terrorism in Africa, particularly how extremist groups move, adapt, and evolve across porous borders. In his analysis of jihadist networks, Hansen argues that the Sahel represents a strategic corridor linking West Africa to North Africa and the Middle East, allowing terrorist groups to coordinate logistics, funding, and recruitment across regions. His research highlights that groups such as Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and ISGS are not isolated movements but parts of a broader network of violent extremism operating in weakly governed spaces.

Bruno Charbonneau and T. Sears in their article entitled, “Peace Operations in the Francophone Sahel: Beyond the Security Horizon”,<sup>21</sup> the Sahel crisis is deeply political: state weakness, corruption, and lack of legitimacy have eroded public trust, making extremist narratives appealing. He notes that by aligning with national elites and marginalizing local voices, France’s interventions have reinforced colonial hierarchies and perceptions of foreign domination. In Mali, he shows how the reliance on external

actors undermined national ownership of peace processes, while in Burkina Faso and Niger, similar patterns led to fragmented security arrangements. He further emphasizes that the militarization of counter-terrorism often sidelines human rights concerns and governance reforms. The result is a vicious cycle where military “successes” are temporary, as new insurgent groups emerge from unresolved grievances. He calls for a rethinking of counter-terrorism as a political and developmental issue, not a purely security one. His work is thus indispensable in understanding the contradictions of external intervention — a critical dimension for this study’s focus on sustainable counter-terrorism in the Sahel.

Kalilou Sidibé in his book entitled, *Understanding Radicalization and Insecurity in the Sahel*,<sup>22</sup> provides a uniquely local perspective on terrorism in Mali and the broader Sahel. His work centers on how ethnic divisions, governance failures, and poor justice systems have turned the Sahel into a breeding ground for radicalization. He argues that local grievances are often manipulated by extremist groups who promise justice, security, and representation. For example, in central Mali, the Fulani communities’ marginalization by both the state and rival ethnic groups has been instrumentalized by jihadist recruiters. He also critiques the role of regional governments in mishandling counter-terrorism efforts. He notes that Malian, Nigerien, and Burkinabe authorities frequently conflate terrorism with local criminality, leading to widespread abuses and civilian casualties. Such actions, according to him, strengthen extremist propaganda that portrays governments as illegitimate oppressors. Furthermore, He underscores the

importance of traditional and religious leaders in mediation and deradicalization processes. He suggests that community-driven dialogue, rather than purely military solutions, holds the key to long-term peace.

Lene Cold-Ravnkilde in her book entitled, *International Interventions and Security Politics in the Sahel*,<sup>23</sup> focus on the complexities of international partnerships in Sahelian counter-terrorism. She argues that donor-driven security assistance programs, while well-intentioned, often fail to reflect local realities or build genuine state capacity. Her analysis of the EU and UN missions in Mali and Niger reveals that these interventions prioritize short-term stabilization over long-term governance reform. Cold-Ravnkilde highlights how these external programs often bypass local accountability structures, empowering elites while neglecting communities most affected by terrorism.

. Christian Okeke in his book entitled, *Law and Governance in Africa: A Regional Perspective*,<sup>24</sup> contribution to the discourse on terrorism and counter-terrorism in Africa offers an institutional and legal perspective that illuminates the weaknesses of regional security frameworks in the Sahel. He examines how regional organizations such as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the African Union (AU) have struggled to harmonize counter-terrorism strategies among member states. He argues that while the AU adopted the 1999 Convention on the Prevention and Combating of Terrorism, the lack of implementation mechanisms and political will has rendered these frameworks largely ineffective. In the case of Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso, he

notes that the absence of cross-border coordination allows terrorist groups to exploit jurisdictional gaps and escape national enforcement.

Daniel E. Agbiboa, *They Eat Our Sweat: Transport Labor, Corruption, and Everyday Survival in Urban Nigeria*,<sup>25</sup> provides one of the most profound sociological analyses of the Sahel's terrorism problem. His work centers on the concept of "governance failure" and how everyday experiences of corruption, injustice, and exclusion drive people toward extremist groups. In his study, He asserts that many individuals in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso join jihadist organizations not primarily out of religious conviction but as an act of resistance against oppressive systems. He uses ethnographic data to show how state violence, ethnic favoritism, and military impunity alienate entire communities, transforming the fight against terrorism into a cycle of vengeance.

Baz Lecocq in his book, *Disputed Desert: Decolonisation, Competing Nationalisms and Tuareg Rebellions in Northern Mali*,<sup>26</sup> traces the roots of contemporary terrorism to colonial-era state formation and the failure of postcolonial governments to integrate peripheral communities into the nation-state framework. He argues that the arbitrary borders drawn by colonial powers left many ethnic and cultural groups divided across states, creating enduring tensions that jihadist groups now exploit. Lecocq highlights that in northern Mali, historical marginalization of the Tuareg and Songhai populations laid the groundwork for rebellions and alliances with Islamist movements in the 1990s and 2000s. His historical lens provides a critical context for understanding why

military solutions often fail. He contends that the Sahelian states inherited governance models that prioritized central control over inclusion, resulting in decades of neglect of border regions. Consequently, extremist groups step into this void by offering alternative governance based on justice, protection, and identity.

. Baz Lecocq and G. Klute, “Tuareg Separatism in Mali and Niger”,<sup>27</sup> He also critiques the short-termism of international interventions that ignore these deep historical dynamics. Counter-terrorism must therefore be linked to reimagining the state-society contract, addressing historical grievances, and promoting regional integration. His historical approach bridges the gap between past and present, revealing that terrorism in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso is not merely a modern crisis but a symptom of long-term structural disconnection between rulers and the ruled.

Morten Bøås, “Understanding Jihadist Governance and Local Agency in the Sahel”,<sup>28</sup> delves into the micro-politics of terrorism in the Sahel, focusing on how extremist groups maintain resilience despite sustained military pressure. He introduces the idea of “everyday insurgencies,” where local communities engage with jihadist actors pragmatically rather than ideologically. Through fieldwork in Mali and Burkina Faso, he demonstrates that local populations often collaborate with insurgents out of necessity — for protection, survival, or access to resources — rather than support for their ideology. He argues that this fluid relationship between civilians and insurgents challenges the binary understanding of “terrorists versus victims.” In many Sahelian villages, jihadist governance provides dispute resolution, taxation, and security where the state is absent.

He critiques counter-terrorism campaigns that indiscriminately target these communities, arguing that such approaches destroy fragile trust networks and deepen resentment.

Delphine Pellerin in her book entitled, *Women, Peace and Counter-Terrorism in the Sahel*,<sup>29</sup> examines gender and community resilience in the context of counter-terrorism, an often overlooked aspect of Sahelian security studies. She argues that women play dual roles in terrorism dynamics — both as victims and as agents of resistance. Drawing from case studies in Mali and Burkina Faso, She shows how women's associations, peace committees, and informal networks have become vital in early warning systems, deradicalization, and social mediation. She critiques the exclusion of women from formal security processes, noting that international and national counter-terrorism strategies often adopt a masculine, militarized framework that marginalizes female voices. She contends that such exclusion limits the effectiveness of interventions, as women are often the first to detect signs of radicalization in their families and communities.

Together, these scholars provide a multidimensional understanding of terrorism in the Sahel. They collectively reveal that violent extremism is sustained by weak governance, ethnic marginalization, and misguided counter-terrorism policies. While military interventions can suppress insurgencies temporarily, long-term peace in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso requires inclusive governance, socio-economic development, and the restoration of state legitimacy. While external interventions remain central to

counter-terrorism efforts, their long-term effectiveness depends on inclusive governance, regional cooperation, and addressing the root causes of instability.

## **Chapterization**

This study will be organized into five detailed chapters, each addressing specific components of terrorism and counter-terrorism dynamics within the Sahel from 2005 to 2025.

### **Chapter One: Background to the Study**

This chapter will introduce the research topic, highlighting the escalation of terrorism in the Sahel and its implications for regional security. It will clearly state the research problem, aim, objectives, research questions, and significance of the study. The chapter will also outline the scope, methodology, and limitations of the research, alongside a preliminary review of relevant literature.

### **Chapter Two: Terrorism in the Sahel — Causes, Actors, and Evolution (2005–2025)**

This chapter will explore the origins and drivers of terrorism in the Sahel, including governance failures, poverty, extremism, transnational crime, and regional grievances. It will examine major terrorist groups such as Boko Haram, ISGS, and AQIM, analyzing their structure, recruitment strategies, funding sources, and operational evolution over the 20-year period.

### **Chapter Three: Impact of Terrorism on Security, Society, and Development**

This chapter will assess the consequences of terrorism on Sahelian states such as Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso. It will analyze disruptions to human security, education,

economic stability, displacement patterns, humanitarian crises, and erosion of state control. Special attention will be given to how terrorism weakens governance and contributes to regional instability.

#### **Chapter Four: Counter-Terrorism Strategies and Regional Responses**

This chapter will examine national, regional, and international counter-terrorism approaches, including military interventions, intelligence cooperation, border control, deradicalization programs, and community-based security initiatives. It will evaluate the effectiveness and challenges of interventions such as Operation Barkhane, MINUSMA, the G5 Sahel Joint Force, and African-led initiatives, highlighting both progress and persistent obstacles.

#### **Chapter Five: Conclusion**

The final chapter will synthesize key findings, reflecting on the relationship between sustained terrorism and state fragility in the Sahel. It will present informed recommendations for improving security governance, enhancing economy-linked counter-radicalization programs, and strengthening regional collaboration for long-term peace and stability.

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## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **TERRORISM IN THE SAHEL: CAUSES, ACTORS, AND EVOLUTION (2005–2025)**

#### **Introduction**

The Sahel region, stretching from Mauritania in the west to Sudan in the east, has emerged as one of the most volatile and insecure zones in the world over the last two decades. Since 2005, terrorism in this semi-arid belt of Africa has evolved from sporadic insurgent attacks into a full-fledged regional crisis that threatens the stability of West and Central Africa. The Sahel's strategic geography—lying between the Arab Maghreb and sub-Saharan Africa—has rendered it a corridor for transnational criminal networks, jihadist movements, and illicit trade in arms, drugs, and humans.<sup>1</sup> Terrorism in this region has been shaped by a combination of weak state institutions, porous borders, and socio-

economic deprivation, which together have produced fertile ground for extremist ideologies and non-state armed groups.

The transformation of the Sahel into a major theatre of global jihadism is tied to both internal and external dynamics. Internally, the collapse of governance structures in countries such as Mali and Niger has allowed armed groups to occupy ungoverned spaces and exploit local grievances.<sup>2</sup> Externally, the aftermath of the Libyan civil war in 2011 and the proliferation of weapons from Muammar Gaddafi's stockpiles accelerated the militarization of regional conflicts.<sup>3</sup> The United Nations, the African Union (AU), and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) have all recognized the Sahel as an epicentre of terrorism that demands collective security mechanisms.

The human cost of terrorism in the Sahel has been devastating. According to the Global Terrorism Index (GTI), the region accounted for more than 40 percent of all terrorism-related deaths worldwide in 2023.<sup>4</sup> Civilian populations in Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, and Chad have borne the brunt of jihadist violence, with entire communities displaced and livelihoods destroyed. Terrorism has also undermined economic growth, exacerbated poverty, and eroded public confidence in state authority.<sup>5</sup> This chapter critically examines the historical trajectory, actors, causes, and responses to terrorism in the Sahel between 2005 and 2025.

### **Historical Development and Evolution of Terrorism in the Sahel (2005–2025)**

The evolution of terrorism in the Sahel can be traced through three major phases: the post-Algerian civil war spillover (2005–2011), the Libyan collapse and regional militarization (2011–2016), and the expansion of jihadist networks (2016–2025).

The first phase (2005–2011) was characterized by the migration of extremist elements from North Africa, particularly remnants of the Algerian Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC), which later became al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM).<sup>6</sup> AQIM established operational bases in the vast deserts of northern Mali and began to engage in kidnapping, smuggling, and attacks on military and foreign targets. This period saw the Sahel transition from a peripheral zone of instability to a crucial logistical hub for transnational jihadism.

The second phase (2011–2016) followed the collapse of the Libyan state after the fall of Gaddafi. Weapons from Libya flooded into the Sahel, fueling conflicts in Mali, Niger, and Chad.<sup>7</sup> In 2012, Tuareg rebels under the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA) launched an uprising in northern Mali, which was soon hijacked by jihadist groups such as Ansar Dine, AQIM, and the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJWA).<sup>8</sup> By early 2013, the jihadists had captured major northern cities like Gao, Timbuktu, and Kidal, declaring the region an Islamic emirate before being pushed back by the French-led Operation Serval.<sup>9</sup>

The third phase (2016–2025) marked the deepening entrenchment of terrorism across the central Sahel. The emergence of the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) in 2015, following a splinter from MUJWA, introduced fierce competition among jihadist

factions.<sup>10</sup> Groups began aligning either with AQIM or the Islamic State, leading to a proliferation of attacks and shifting alliances. The spread of violence from northern Mali to Burkina Faso and Niger transformed the Sahel from a localized conflict zone into a transnational insurgency belt.<sup>11</sup> By 2025, terrorist activity had expanded southward toward coastal West Africa, threatening Ghana, Togo, and Benin.<sup>12</sup>

The evolution of terrorism in the Sahel has thus been dynamic—shaped by local grievances, global jihadist ideologies, and geopolitical rivalries. The interplay between state fragility and militant expansion has made the Sahel a critical testing ground for African and international counter-terrorism efforts.

### **Key Terrorist Groups and Actors in the Sahel**

The Sahel hosts a complex network of terrorist organizations, each with distinct ideological motivations, leadership structures, and operational strategies. The most prominent actors include al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM), Boko Haram, and Ansaroul Islam. Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) originated from the Algerian GSPC and has been central to jihadist expansion in the Sahel since 2005.<sup>13</sup> Its strategic objective is to overthrow secular governments and establish an Islamic caliphate governed by Sharia. AQIM's influence extends across northern Mali, Niger, and parts of Mauritania. It finances operations through smuggling, ransom, and illicit trade.<sup>14</sup>

Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), formed in 2015 under Adnan Abu Walid al-Sahrawi, pledged allegiance to the Islamic State and became the main ISIS affiliate in the Sahel.<sup>15</sup> ISGS gained notoriety for high-profile attacks on Nigerien and Burkinabè troops, and for targeting civilians to assert control over territory. Despite leadership losses in 2021, ISGS has remained resilient due to decentralized command and local recruitment.<sup>16</sup> Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) was established in 2017 through the merger of AQIM's Saharan branch, Ansar Dine, and Al-Mourabitoun. Led by Iyad Ag Ghaly, JNIM has become the most dominant jihadist coalition in the Sahel, coordinating attacks across Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger.<sup>17</sup> Its strategy blends local grievances with global jihadist rhetoric, making it adaptable to diverse communities.

Boko Haram, originally rooted in northeastern Nigeria, has expanded its operational footprint into the western Sahel.<sup>18</sup> After splitting into two factions—the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) and the Shekau-led Boko Haram—the group increased cross-border activities around Lake Chad, affecting Niger and Chad.<sup>19</sup> Boko Haram's presence underscores the interconnectedness of West African terrorism. Ansaroul Islam, founded in 2016 in Burkina Faso by Ibrahim Malam Dicko, represents the localization of jihadist ideology.<sup>20</sup> Emerging from religious and ethnic grievances, the group spearheaded attacks in northern Burkina Faso and became a catalyst for radicalization among marginalized communities.

Collectively, these groups have developed transnational linkages, shared resources, and overlapping operational zones, creating what the United Nations describes

as “a complex terrorist ecosystem” in the Sahel.<sup>21</sup> Their tactics include improvised explosive devices (IEDs), ambushes, suicide bombings, and targeted assassinations, often aimed at destabilizing local governance and undermining military presence.

### **Major Causes and Drivers of Terrorism in the Sahel**

Terrorism in the Sahel is driven by an intricate web of political, economic, social, and environmental factors.

**1. Weak Governance and State Fragility:** The chronic weakness of state institutions has left vast territories ungoverned. Corruption, poor public services, and limited state presence have alienated local populations, providing fertile ground for extremist recruitment.<sup>22</sup> Many communities view jihadist groups as alternative providers of justice and security.

**2. Socio-Economic Deprivation and Youth Unemployment:** The Sahel suffers from extreme poverty, unemployment, and inequality. With limited educational and economic opportunities, many young people become susceptible to recruitment by militant groups that offer financial incentives or a sense of purpose.<sup>23</sup>

**3. Ethnic and Communal Tensions:** Longstanding ethnic divisions—such as between Fulani pastoralists and sedentary farming communities—have been exploited by extremist groups to fuel local conflicts.<sup>24</sup> Jihadist factions often present themselves as defenders of marginalized groups, thereby gaining local legitimacy.

**4. Environmental Degradation and Climate Change:** Desertification, drought, and resource scarcity have intensified competition over land and water.<sup>25</sup> The resulting

displacement and loss of livelihoods push communities toward radicalization or cooperation with armed groups as survival strategies.

**5. External Influences and the Libyan Fallout:** The collapse of Libya unleashed a flow of arms and fighters into the Sahel.<sup>26</sup> Former mercenaries and Islamist militants found refuge in Mali and Niger, while weapons proliferation empowered insurgent networks. The absence of coordinated border management amplified the crisis.

**6. Ideological Radicalization and Global Jihadism:** The Sahel has become an ideological frontier for al-Qaeda and ISIS, both of which frame local grievances within a global Islamist narrative.<sup>27</sup> Online propaganda and religious indoctrination have extended their reach into vulnerable communities.

These factors interact in mutually reinforcing ways, creating a vicious cycle of insecurity and underdevelopment that perpetuates terrorism. The failure of national governments and international partners to address root causes has prolonged the insurgency.

### **Regional and International Responses to Terrorism in the Sahel**

Efforts to combat terrorism in the Sahel have involved regional initiatives, international interventions, and multilateral cooperation.

**1. Regional Security Frameworks:** The most notable regional initiative is the G5 Sahel Joint Force (FC-G5S), established in 2014 by Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, Chad, and Mauritania to coordinate cross-border military operations.<sup>28</sup> Despite logistical and financial constraints, the force has facilitated intelligence sharing and limited joint patrols.

**2. African Union and ECOWAS Involvement:** The African Union Mission for Mali and the Sahel (MISAHEL) and ECOWAS security frameworks have sought to promote political dialogue and strengthen governance.<sup>29</sup> However, limited funding and overlapping mandates have weakened their effectiveness.

**3. International Military Operations:** France's Operation Serval (2013) and Operation Barkhane (2014–2022) were pivotal in recapturing territory from jihadists in northern Mali.<sup>30</sup> In 2022, France ended Barkhane amid rising anti-French sentiment, shifting support to European and local coalitions.<sup>31</sup> The United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), deployed in 2013, contributed to stabilization efforts until its withdrawal in 2023 due to deteriorating host-state relations.<sup>32</sup>

**4. United States and European Union Assistance:** The U.S. Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership (TSCTP) and European Union Training Mission (EUTM) in Mali have provided capacity building and counter-terrorism training.<sup>33</sup> Nevertheless, critics argue that militarized approaches have failed to address governance and development deficits.<sup>34</sup>

**5. Local Peacebuilding and Community Approaches:** Several non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and local initiatives have promoted deradicalization and dialogue between communities and state actors.<sup>35</sup> Emphasis on local reconciliation has proven essential to reducing recruitment and restoring trust.

Despite these responses, terrorism in the Sahel persists, underscoring the limits of external interventions. The proliferation of military coups in Mali, Burkina Faso, and

Niger between 2020 and 2023 further complicated cooperation with Western partners.<sup>36</sup>

There is a growing consensus that sustainable security in the Sahel requires not just counter-terrorism, but comprehensive state rebuilding, inclusive governance, and socio-economic transformation.

## **Conclusion**

From 2005 to 2025, terrorism in the Sahel has evolved from isolated insurgencies into a complex regional threat with profound implications for African and global security. The crisis reflects deep-seated structural weaknesses—fragile governance, poverty, and inequality—exacerbated by external shocks and ideological extremism. The Sahel's experience illustrates that counter-terrorism cannot succeed without addressing human security and state legitimacy. International efforts must therefore transition from reactive military interventions to preventive strategies grounded in development, good governance, and regional solidarity.

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## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **IMPACT OF TERRORISM ON SECURITY, SOCIETY, AND DEVELOPMENT**

#### **Impact of Terrorism on National and Regional Security**

Terrorism constitutes one of the most formidable threats to both national and regional security in the twenty-first century. Across Africa, particularly within the Sahel region and Nigeria's northeastern corridor, terrorist groups such as Boko Haram, the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), and Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) have perpetuated cycles of violence that undermine state sovereignty and security architecture. The primary impact on national security manifests through the weakening of internal defense mechanisms, increased militarization, and the diversion of

resources from essential state-building functions to counter-terrorism operations.<sup>1</sup> This has led to overstretched security forces, loss of military personnel, and erosion of public trust in state protection mechanisms.

At the regional level, terrorism transcends national borders through the proliferation of small arms and light weapons (SALWs), recruitment networks, and smuggling routes.<sup>2</sup> The Sahel region, serving as a transit corridor between North and Sub-Saharan Africa, has become a hub for cross-border insurgency. Such transnational linkages have prompted regional security alliances such as the G5 Sahel Joint Force and the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF).<sup>3</sup> However, despite these collaborative frameworks, coordination challenges, inadequate funding, and divergent national interests continue to impede effective regional counter-terrorism operations.<sup>4</sup>

Furthermore, terrorism exacerbates humanitarian crises by displacing millions of people, thereby overwhelming neighboring countries with refugee inflows. The porous nature of African borders makes regional security coordination even more complex, as insurgents exploit ungoverned spaces.<sup>5</sup> Consequently, terrorism not only undermines territorial integrity but also destabilizes the collective peace and security of entire regions, especially in West and Central Africa. The cumulative result is a regional security dilemma where states simultaneously cooperate and compete in addressing the terrorist threat.<sup>6</sup>

### **Socio-Economic Consequences of Terrorism**

The socioeconomic consequences of terrorism are far-reaching, cutting across all sectors of national life. The destruction of infrastructure, closure of industries, and disruption of agricultural production lead to significant economic downturns. In Nigeria, the activities of Boko Haram have devastated the economies of Borno, Yobe, and Adamawa States—reducing agricultural output and trade, and creating widespread unemployment.<sup>7</sup> Terrorist attacks often target markets, schools, and transport routes, paralyzing commerce and deterring both local and foreign investment. The result is declining Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth and an increased fiscal burden on affected states.<sup>8</sup>

Tourism, a vital source of income for many African nations, also suffers severely. The perception of insecurity discourages international tourists, leading to reduced foreign exchange earnings and the collapse of local hospitality industries.<sup>9</sup> The long-term implications include reduced government revenues and widening inequalities between stable and conflict-prone regions. Moreover, terrorism diverts public expenditure from developmental projects to defense and emergency relief efforts.<sup>10</sup> Such diversion constrains budgetary allocations to education, healthcare, and infrastructure, thereby aggravating poverty levels and reducing the Human Development Index (HDI).

In addition, terrorism contributes to brain drain, as professionals migrate from volatile regions in search of safer environments.<sup>11</sup> The displacement of populations disrupts labor markets, education, and community life, creating cycles of dependency on humanitarian aid. Furthermore, rural economies collapse as farmers abandon their lands,

leading to food shortages and increased prices.<sup>12</sup> The cumulative socioeconomic effects of terrorism thus weaken national productivity, erode public morale, and perpetuate underdevelopment in affected societies.

### **Social and Humanitarian Impact of Terrorism**

Beyond economic loss, terrorism inflicts profound social and humanitarian consequences on individuals and communities. One of the most devastating outcomes is the large-scale displacement of populations. In the Lake Chad Basin alone, millions have been displaced internally, while others have sought refuge in neighboring countries such as Chad, Niger, and Cameroon.<sup>13</sup> This mass displacement generates humanitarian emergencies marked by food insecurity, poor sanitation, and inadequate healthcare services. Refugee camps often become breeding grounds for disease outbreaks, sexual violence, and exploitation.

Terrorism also destroys the social fabric of communities by instilling fear, mistrust, and suspicion among ethnic or religious groups.<sup>14</sup> The psychological trauma experienced by victims—including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety, and depression—undermines community cohesion and hinders reconciliation. Women and children are particularly vulnerable; many have been subjected to abduction, forced marriages, and sexual slavery by terrorist organizations.<sup>15</sup> Children who survive such ordeals often become child soldiers or are deprived of formal education, thus perpetuating cycles of poverty and violence.<sup>16</sup>

Additionally, terrorism challenges humanitarian responses by restricting access to affected areas. Aid workers are frequently targeted, leading to the suspension of relief operations.<sup>17</sup> These constraints deepen human suffering and hinder long-term recovery efforts. The breakdown of traditional support systems, coupled with the erosion of trust in state institutions, further weakens the resilience of affected populations. Thus, terrorism is not only a political or security issue—it is a profound humanitarian crisis that undermines the social and moral foundations of society.

### **Implications of Terrorism for Political Stability and Development**

Terrorism poses a serious threat to political stability by undermining state legitimacy, governance structures, and democratic consolidation. Governments confronted with persistent terrorist threats often resort to emergency powers, restrictions on civil liberties, and militarized governance.<sup>18</sup> These responses, while sometimes necessary, can lead to human rights violations and further alienate the citizenry. The weakening of state institutions due to insecurity erodes citizens' confidence in democratic governance, encouraging alternative loyalties to non-state actors or ethnic militias.<sup>19</sup>

In fragile states, terrorism exacerbates political fragmentation by deepening ethnic, religious, and regional divides. Politicians sometimes exploit insecurity for political gain, further polarizing societies and obstructing peacebuilding efforts.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, persistent insecurity discourages foreign investment and bilateral cooperation, thereby stifling long-term development initiatives.<sup>21</sup> In Nigeria and other Sahelian countries, terrorism has

redirected public spending towards security sectors, leaving little room for socioeconomic development projects.<sup>22</sup>

Terrorism also impedes progress toward achieving the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly those related to peace, justice, and strong institutions (SDG 16).<sup>23</sup> By destabilizing governance systems, it undermines policy continuity and disrupts electoral processes.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, the influx of displaced persons into urban centers creates unplanned settlements that strain infrastructure and social services, generating new security challenges.<sup>25</sup> Hence, the persistence of terrorism hampers not only political stability but also the broader developmental aspirations of affected nations.

## **Conclusion**

In summary, terrorism has emerged as a multidimensional threat that transcends conventional notions of security. Its impacts extend from the destabilization of national and regional security systems to profound socioeconomic, social, and humanitarian disruptions. Terrorism undermines the very foundations of political stability and sustainable development by weakening institutions, displacing populations, and diverting vital resources from growth-oriented policies. Addressing this menace requires a holistic strategy that combines military intervention with socioeconomic reconstruction, regional cooperation, and community-based peacebuilding. Only through such comprehensive approaches can states in Africa and beyond restore security, promote social cohesion, and achieve sustainable development in the face of terrorism's enduring challenges.

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## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **COUNTER-TERRORISM STRATEGIES AND REGIONAL RESPONSES**

#### **Introduction**

Terrorism in the Sahel region has evolved into one of the most complex and persistent security challenges in contemporary Africa. Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso, forming the core of the central Sahel, have faced violent extremism marked by attacks

from jihadist groups affiliated with al-Qaeda and the Islamic State. These countries have adopted a range of counter-terrorism measures at national, regional, and international levels. The multiplicity of actors and strategies reflects the growing recognition that terrorism in the Sahel cannot be contained by isolated national responses but requires integrated frameworks involving military, diplomatic, and community-based mechanisms. This chapter examines the counter-terrorism strategies and regional responses to terrorism in the Sahel, focusing on Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso. It explores national approaches, regional cooperation efforts, international interventions, community-based strategies, and the challenges of implementation and evaluation within the broader context of regional insecurity and fragile governance.

### **National Strategies**

The national counter-terrorism strategies of Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso have evolved through stages of adaptation and reform. Each state's approach reflects its unique political context, military capacity, and exposure to insurgency. Mali was among the first Sahelian countries to experience the convergence of separatist insurgency and jihadist militancy after the 2012 Tuareg rebellion. The government initially adopted a military-first strategy through the Plan de Sécurisation Intégrée des Régions du Centre (PSIRC), designed to restore state presence in central and northern Mali. This plan combined military operations with governance reforms and community reconciliation programs. However, persistent insecurity in the Mopti and Gao regions has revealed the limitations of this approach, as jihadist groups adapted through asymmetric warfare and local

alliances<sup>1</sup>. Mali's post-2020 transition government expanded its counter-terrorism agenda through cooperation with Russia's Wagner Group, signaling a shift from reliance on Western security partnerships to alternative military assistance<sup>2</sup>.

Niger, in contrast, has pursued a preventive and community-centered strategy. Its Plan de Soutien à la Sécurité et au Développement des Zones Frontalières seeks to integrate counter-terrorism with socio-economic stabilization. The Nigerien government has prioritized strengthening intelligence gathering, establishing special counter-terrorism units, and enhancing coordination with local vigilante groups known as self-defense committees<sup>3</sup>. Unlike Mali, Niger maintained close partnerships with France and the United States, allowing it to benefit from foreign training and drone surveillance bases<sup>4</sup>. This pragmatic balance between external support and internal stabilization has made Niger relatively more resilient, although terrorist attacks around Diffa and Tillabéri remain frequent<sup>5</sup>.

Burkina Faso initially lacked a coherent counter-terrorism framework when violence spread into its northern provinces around 2015. The government responded by creating specialized military task forces such as Groupement des Forces Anti-Terroristes (GFAT) and enacting emergency measures under the Plan National de Réponse à l'Extrémisme Violent. In 2020, the creation of Volontaires pour la Défense de la Patrie (VDP) marked a shift toward mobilizing civilian auxiliaries for defense<sup>6</sup>. While this strategy expanded territorial control, it also raised human rights concerns and the risk of intercommunal violence. The 2022 military junta deepened this militarized response,

emphasizing sovereignty and rejecting certain external partnerships, including the withdrawal of French troops from Ouagadougou<sup>7</sup>.

Overall, the three states' national strategies illustrate divergent approaches—Mali's militarization and shifting alliances, Niger's preventive diplomacy, and Burkina Faso's community militarization—each with varying levels of success and sustainability.

### **Regional Response**

Recognizing that terrorism transcends borders, the Sahelian states have engaged in multiple regional cooperative frameworks. Chief among these is the G5 Sahel Joint Force (Force conjointe du G5 Sahel, FC-G5S), launched in 2017 by Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger. The Force aims to conduct cross-border operations against terrorism, trafficking, and organized crime across designated sectors of the Sahel<sup>8</sup>. Despite early optimism, the G5 Sahel faced operational and financial difficulties, coupled with political instability in member states. Mali's withdrawal in 2022 further weakened its cohesion.<sup>9</sup>

ECOWAS has also been instrumental in promoting regional security initiatives. Its 2013 Counter-Terrorism Strategy and Implementation Plan emphasizes intelligence sharing, border control, and the harmonization of national laws on terrorism. The ECOWAS Commission supports member states through the West African Police Information System (WAPIS), enhancing cross-border criminal databases and joint investigations<sup>10</sup>. However, implementation has been uneven due to weak coordination mechanisms and overlapping mandates among security institutions.

The African Union (AU) has provided overarching strategic direction through its African Centre for the Study and Research on Terrorism (ACSRT) and Nouakchott Process on regional security cooperation. These initiatives promote dialogue between Sahelian and Maghreb states, yet their practical impact on field operations remains limited by resource constraints and political fragmentation.<sup>11</sup> The establishment of the Accra Initiative in 2017, involving Ghana, Benin, Togo, and the Sahelian states, represents an emerging effort to prevent the southward spread of terrorism. It reflects the growing recognition that regional security must include West African coastal states increasingly threatened by Sahel-based extremists.<sup>12</sup> Although these frameworks demonstrate regional solidarity, they are hindered by inconsistent funding, inadequate interoperability, and divergent political agendas among member states.

### **International Interventions**

The Sahel's counter-terrorism landscape is deeply shaped by international interventions, reflecting the global dimension of the conflict. France played a leading role through Operation Serval (2013), launched to halt jihadist advances in northern Mali, followed by Operation Barkhane (2014–2022), which expanded across the Sahel to support G5 states. These operations achieved tactical victories but struggled to establish sustainable security governance.<sup>13</sup> Local perceptions of neocolonial interference and civilian casualties contributed to France's eventual withdrawal from Mali and Burkina Faso.<sup>14</sup>

The United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), established in 2013, was tasked with supporting peace implementation, protecting civilians, and assisting state restoration. However, MINUSMA's limited mandate, logistical challenges, and political friction with Malian authorities constrained its effectiveness<sup>15</sup>. Following deteriorating relations, Mali requested the mission's complete withdrawal in 2023.<sup>16</sup>

The European Union (EU) has been a major donor and trainer through the EUTM Mali and EUCAP Sahel missions, focusing on capacity-building for military and police forces<sup>17</sup>. Similarly, the United States has contributed through the Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership (TSCTP), providing training, equipment, and surveillance support to Sahelian militaries.<sup>18</sup>

Beyond Western actors, Russia's growing footprint in Mali and Burkina Faso through the Wagner Group signifies a new geopolitical alignment. These partnerships have prioritized regime protection and combat operations over democratic accountability, raising questions about long-term regional stability.<sup>19</sup> Overall, international interventions have provided critical military and financial support but have not resolved the root causes of terrorism—namely governance deficits, poverty, and local grievances.

### **Community and Non-Military Approaches**

Given the limits of military strategies, non-military and community-centered approaches have emerged as essential components of counter-terrorism in the Sahel. In

Mali, several local peace agreements, such as the 2016 Agreement of Koro Circle, involved negotiations between communities and militant groups to reduce violence and reopen markets<sup>20</sup>. These local accords highlight the pragmatic turn toward dialogue as a survival strategy in areas where state control is weak. Civil society organizations and traditional leaders have also facilitated reconciliation and reintegration programs for defected combatants.

Niger's approach integrates community dialogue with state development planning. Its Programme de Cohésion Communautaire in Diffa seeks to rebuild trust between civilians and security forces. Religious leaders and women's associations play a vital role in countering extremist narratives through radio broadcasts and civic education<sup>21</sup>. The National Commission for the Collection and Control of Illicit Arms (CNCCAI) also supports disarmament and reintegration efforts among former insurgents.

Burkina Faso has experimented with deradicalization and civic resilience initiatives through the Centre National d'Études Stratégiques sur la Sécurité (CNESS) and grassroots networks of traditional chiefs. However, the rise of self-defense militias and escalating communal violence have undermined these efforts, blurring the line between protection and reprisal.<sup>22</sup> Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) such as the Centre pour le Dialogue Humanitaire (HD) and Search for Common Ground have played an important role in local peacebuilding, promoting social cohesion and mediation. Despite their progress, these programs remain underfunded and often overshadowed by militarized state policies.

## **Evaluation and Challenges**

Despite significant investments, counter-terrorism in the Sahel continues to face structural challenges. First, the fragmented nature of governance undermines coordination. Weak institutions, corruption, and political instability have hampered the sustainability of security reforms<sup>23</sup>. Second, human rights abuses committed by national armies and allied militias have alienated local populations and fueled recruitment into extremist groups<sup>24</sup>.

Third, regional coordination remains inconsistent. The collapse of the G5 Sahel's cohesion and tensions between national priorities and collective goals have weakened joint operations<sup>25</sup>. Fourth, overreliance on external actors has created dependency and eroded local ownership of security initiatives. Additionally, socio-economic drivers of radicalization—including unemployment, inequality, and marginalization of rural communities—remain inadequately addressed. In many areas, jihadist groups fill governance vacuums by providing justice and security, revealing the limits of purely military approaches.<sup>26</sup>

Finally, the emergence of new alliances with Russia and the exit of Western forces have reshaped the geopolitical landscape, potentially deepening rivalries among external powers while leaving underlying grievances unresolved.<sup>27</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Counter-terrorism efforts in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso illustrate the tension between military necessity and political legitimacy. While national, regional, and international initiatives have achieved temporary security gains, they have failed to deliver durable stability. Effective counter-terrorism in the Sahel requires integrating security measures with governance reform, economic inclusion, and community participation.

Policy recommendations include: Strengthening accountability and civilian oversight of security operations; Expanding regional intelligence-sharing frameworks under ECOWAS and the Accra Initiative; Prioritizing community dialogue and reconciliation over punitive military campaigns; Investing in youth employment and rural development to address recruitment drivers; and Promoting inclusive diplomacy that balances global partnerships with local sovereignty. Ultimately, the path to peace in the Sahel lies not in foreign-led interventions but in restoring trust between the state and its citizens through equitable governance and sustainable development.

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## CHAPTER FIVE

### CONCLUSION

This study has examined the dynamics of terrorism and counter-terrorism within the Sahel region from 2005 to 2025, focusing on the evolving nature of threats, their root causes, and the multi-layered responses employed to combat them. The Sahel, stretching across Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, Chad, and Mauritania, has emerged as one of the most volatile regions in Africa due to the interplay of weak governance, porous borders, climate-induced stress, poverty, and extremist infiltration. The research has shown that terrorism in this region is not merely a product of religious extremism but a complex outcome of political, socio-economic, and environmental fragilities that have compounded over decades.<sup>1</sup>

The study provided the rationale for examining the Sahel as a regional security hotspot, highlighting that terrorism there represents both a national and transnational crisis. Through historical and analytical methods, the research established that the rise of terrorism in the Sahel was largely driven by long-standing governance failures, corruption, and marginalization of peripheral communities.<sup>2</sup> The fall of the Gaddafi regime in Libya in 2011 released large quantities of weapons into the region, further destabilizing fragile states and empowering militant actors.<sup>3</sup>

Groups such as Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), and Boko Haram have exploited these vulnerabilities to expand their operations. Their growth was not simply ideological but strategic—rooted in exploiting poverty, ethnic divisions, and disillusionment with state authority.<sup>4</sup> These groups have transformed local grievances into broader jihadist narratives, connecting local conflicts to global extremist networks. Their adaptability and capacity to blend into local socio-political environments have made counter-terrorism efforts particularly difficult.

The impact of terrorism on the Sahel has been devastating. Persistent insecurity has crippled state institutions, displaced millions of civilians, and destabilized national economies. Educational systems have collapsed in many conflict zones, with thousands of schools closed due to attacks or fear of abduction.<sup>5</sup> The humanitarian situation has worsened, with increased displacement, food insecurity, and the destruction of livelihoods. Terrorism has diverted limited state resources toward military expenditures, further weakening social services and entrenching poverty.<sup>6</sup>

The various responses to terrorism across the region have revealed both determination and deep limitations. National governments have developed counter-terrorism policies, but these are often undercut by inadequate funding, lack of coordination, and weak institutional capacity. Regional initiatives such as the G5 Sahel Joint Force and the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) have demonstrated the

importance of collective security but remain plagued by financial constraints and logistical weaknesses.<sup>7</sup> International interventions like Operation Barkhane and the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) provided temporary relief but did not achieve lasting stability, largely because they emphasized military operations over political reconciliation.<sup>8</sup>

Ultimately, terrorism in the Sahel is a symptom of deeper governance crises rather than an isolated security issue. The persistence of extremism over two decades underscores that counter-terrorism cannot succeed solely through kinetic measures. Sustainable peace requires tackling the structural drivers of insecurity—namely, inequality, corruption, exclusion, and weak state legitimacy.<sup>9</sup> Foreign interventions, while helpful in containing violence, cannot substitute for domestic reform and local ownership of peace processes. The withdrawal of Operation Barkhane in 2022 and the growing presence of private military actors, such as the Russian-linked Wagner Group, underscore the political complexity and shifting alliances in the region.<sup>10</sup>

At the regional level, the creation of the G5 Sahel Joint Force represented a promising step toward collective action. However, mutual suspicion among member states, financial dependency, and external interference have limited its success.<sup>11</sup> The lack of genuine coordination and local trust has hindered intelligence gathering and deradicalization programs. Many communities remain alienated from national governments that they perceive as corrupt, distant, or repressive.<sup>12</sup> This disconnect

between citizens and their leaders has allowed extremist groups to offer alternative forms of governance, often providing rudimentary justice, security, and welfare in areas abandoned by the state. Rebuilding this relationship between state and society is therefore central to any sustainable counter-terrorism strategy.<sup>13</sup>

The study reinforces the human security perspective, emphasizing that security extends beyond territorial defense to encompass economic stability, access to justice, and human dignity.<sup>14</sup> The Sahelian experience demonstrates that the militarization of security, though sometimes necessary, cannot eradicate terrorism without addressing the underlying socio-economic realities. The findings also support the fragile state theory, which holds that terrorism thrives in contexts of institutional weakness and poor governance.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, the Sahel's crisis exemplifies the “glocalization” of terrorism—where global jihadist ideologies are localized through exploitation of domestic grievances.<sup>16</sup> Counter-terrorism in such a setting must therefore be context-sensitive, community-driven, and inclusive.

For the region to achieve stability, Sahelian governments must strengthen governance and accountability, ensuring equitable distribution of resources and transparent public spending.<sup>17</sup> Anti-corruption measures and decentralization policies can foster public trust and improve local participation in governance. Security policies should be integrated with socio-economic recovery, prioritizing education, agricultural development, and youth employment to reduce extremist recruitment.<sup>18</sup>

Regional cooperation through frameworks such as the G5 Sahel and ECOWAS must be deepened, emphasizing joint operations, intelligence sharing, and collective diplomacy.<sup>19</sup> International partners, meanwhile, should shift from short-term military interventions to long-term capacity-building efforts that support governance reform and reconciliation.<sup>20</sup> At the community level, engagement with traditional leaders, religious figures, and women's groups is vital to promote tolerance and counter extremist ideologies.<sup>21</sup>

Additionally, environmental factors that exacerbate conflict—such as desertification and competition over water and pasture—should be integrated into security planning.<sup>22</sup> Climate adaptation, sustainable land use, and conflict-sensitive resource management will reduce tensions that often feed extremist recruitment. Protecting human rights in counter-terrorism operations is equally essential, as abuses by security forces have been shown to deepen resentment and drive local populations toward insurgents.<sup>23</sup>

The Sahel remains a crucial test for Africa's broader struggle against violent extremism. The period from 2005 to 2025 reveals both the dangers of state neglect and the potential for renewal through regional solidarity and accountable governance. While terrorism has eroded state authority and deepened humanitarian crises, it has also exposed the urgent need for comprehensive reform. The region's future will depend on whether

leaders can transform the lessons of the past two decades into practical, people-centered policies.

Ultimately, victory over terrorism in the Sahel will not be achieved solely through force of arms but through the restoration of justice, opportunity, and dignity. The path forward demands moving from reaction to prevention, from external dependency to regional ownership, and from coercion to inclusion. As the Sahel undergoes political and security realignments, the success of counter-terrorism will depend on rebuilding state legitimacy and ensuring that peace becomes not just the absence of war, but the presence of hope, stability, and development for all.<sup>24</sup>

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