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Commentary

Sahel's Terrorism Problem(s)

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Summary

Sahel has supplanted West Asia and North Africa as the region worst affected by terrorism.

Al-Qaeda has begun increasingly replicating the tactics employed by its Salafi-jihadi rival, Islamic State of Iraq and Levant (ISIS), in Africa's Sahel region, especially so in Mali and Burkina Faso by relying on powerful affiliates like Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM). It has done so to revitalise its ideological appeal and rejuvenate its primacy in the global jihadi fold, even as ISIS has remained the deadliest terror group for the ninth consecutive year.

Given the global geopolitical flux animated by the great power rivalry between the United States and China, escalating conflicts in West Asia and Ukraine, and strong opposition to presence of foreign military presence, terrorism hotspots like Sahel can expect to encounter growing instability. These factors are bound to create a conducive ecosystem for terrorist groups like Al-Qaeda and their affiliates to inflict more violence than before. The deteriorating security conditions have been matched by the regional military juntas' faltering responses to the security challenges. These regimes have not translated their rhetoric and proclamations at international forums[1] into credible deterrent actions against terrorism-related activities.

Breakdown of Security in Sahel

The regional landscape presents complex challenges. The jihadi activities that have kept Burkina Faso embroiled in heightened insecurity since August 2015 have gradually destabilised its neighbouring country, Mali. According to the Global Terrorism Index Report 2024,[2] Burkina Faso and Mali are the first and third most affected countries due to terrorism-related activities, respectively. Additionally, with 26 per cent of all terrorism-related incidents and nearly 50 per cent of all deaths last year due to such incidents, Sahel has supplanted West Asia and North Africa as the region worst affected by terrorism.

The announcement by the military chiefs of Burkina Faso, Niger, and Mali in August 2024 about establishing a task force, the Alliance of Sahel States, to counter the terrorism threat plaguing their countries has remained limited to verbal proclamations until now. There is no clarity as yet about the specifications of the mandate, long and short-term goals, binding commitments and strategy. Mercenary groups like Wagner or Africa Corps,[3] meanwhile, whose deployment was

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[1] **"Burkina Faso: His Excellency Karamoko Jean Marie Traore Minister for Foreign Affairs"**, United Nations, 30 September 2024.

[2] **"Global Terrorism Index Report 2024"**, Institute for Economics & Peace, February 2024.

[3] John A. Lechner, **"Is Africa Corps a Rebranded Wagner Group?"**, *Foreign Policy*, 7 February 2024.

intended to stabilise Sahelian countries, have found it beyond their capability to fight back against assaults launched by terrorist groups lately.

These trends indicate the relevance of the warning bells that the United Nations Secretary-General, António Guterres, sounded at the beginning of this year. He had argued that[4] 'local conflicts and fragilities' had been 'exploited' by terrorist organisations such as 'Daesh (ISIS), Al-Qaeda, and their affiliates' transforming Africa into a 'global epicentre of terrorism'.

Mali and Burkina Faso: Hotbeds of Terrorism in Sahel

Mali

In August 2024, an ambush by Tuareg rebels (possibly now in cohorts with JNIM) resulted in the death of 47 Malian and 84 Wagner[5] officers. In May 2024, the leaders of the Tuareg rebel movement reportedly initiated efforts to sign a non-aggression pact[6] with JNIM. More than 70 individuals were killed and at least 200 others wounded[7] after JNIM targeted critical locations such as Faladie Gendarmerie School (an elite paramilitary training school in Bamako) and a military base near the airport in September this year.

The September attacks in Mali are a significant escalation by the terrorist groups, marking their renewed campaign against the regime. This is because this can be considered the first major attack by JNIM inside the capital in nearly a decade. Moreover, in October 2024, Talha Abu Hind, the Emir of JNIM released a message[8] warning the Malian government and Russian mercenary groups of greater attacks following the suicide attacks on Gao and Timbuktu military airports.

Burkina Faso

Recently, the military regime in Burkina Faso dealt with a significant blow in its attempts to eradicate the jihadist threat in the country nearly two years after the coup took place in September 2022, as Al-Qaeda affiliated groups shot dead hundreds of civilians in August 2024. The above-mentioned targeted attack

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[4] Vibhu Mishra, **"Africa Now a 'Global Epicentre' of Terrorism"**, United Nations, 24 January 2024.

[5] Paul Melly, **"Was Ukraine's Role in Big Wagner Defeat an Own Goal in Africa?"**, *BBC News*, 12 August 2024.

[6] **"Mali: Tuareg Rebels Ask for a Non-Aggression Pact with JNIM Jihadists"**, *Nova News*, 22 May 2024.

[7] Shola Lawal, **"More Than 70 Killed in Mali Attack: What Happened, Why It Matters"**, *Al Jazeera*, 20 September 2024.

[8] Pawel Wójcik, **"In a New Statement, Al-Qaeda in Sahel (JNIM) Emir in Timbuktu Region, Talha…"**, X (formerly Twitter), 7 October 2024.

indicates how the coup, which its architects legitimised as a means to more efficiently address the problems pertaining to terrorism compared to the civilian government, has been gravely undermined.

In the same month, in the lead-up to this deadly attack, at least two other incidents occurred in Burkina Faso, which were attributed to JNIM. On 8 August 2024, a military convoy in the eastern part of the country came under attack after JNIM fighters ambushed the soldiers,[9] the assault forcing the latter to leave behind hundreds of arms intended for official use. Additionally, during the same month, over 400 unarmed villagers[10] were indiscriminately killed by JNIM.

While the country has recorded over 20,000 terrorism-related casualties over the past nine years, 2024 itself has witnessed approximately 3,800 fatalities. Therefore, it is unsurprising that regular clashes or systematic targeted attacks carried out by JNIM have left the country's armed forces or its civilian populace in a vulnerable position.

Key Challenges

Despite the presence of two significant regional organisations in Africa, including the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the African Union (AU), positive regional intervention to strengthen countries' counter-terrorism campaign in the Sahel seems unlikely. Notably, there has been nothing to indicate that the regional organisation—ECOWAS—would expand its mandate beyond taking on economic and political issues under its consideration. The coups that took place in Burkina Faso and Mali, their subsequent exit from the organisation along with imposition of sanctions imposed by the member states, has created internal fissures and undermined it from within. The sanctioned and member states of ECOWAS would need to reconcile issues such as expansion of mandate to include counter-terrorism efforts.

At the same time, regional support, backed by the AU, in military terms to the Sahel seems far-fetched. This is considering its challenge in mustering a consolidated regional counter-terror strategy (especially in an increasingly polarised climate). The challenge arises due to competing interests and inter-state disputes or the

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[9] Zagazola, **"Terrorist Group JNIM Launches Deadly Attack on Military Convoy in Eastern Burkina Faso..."**, X (formerly Twitter), 11 August 2024.

[10] Clash Report, **"Massive Massacre in Burkina Faso by JNIM (Al-Qaeda-Aligned Terror Group). The Group Killed..."**, X (formerly Twitter), 28 August 2024.

limitations placed on deploying the African Standby Force (ASF) to Burkina Faso or Mali.

As per the guidelines, the ASF can, besides instances of war crimes, genocide, or crimes against humanity, be deployed to a country 'at the request of a member state to restore peace and security, in accordance with Article 4(h) and 4(J) of the AU Constitutive act.'[11] However, its deployment to Mali or Burkina Faso, given the regional outcry[12] to the recent coups, seems implausible to envisage at the moment.

Moreover, one of the largest contributors in Africa to missions deployed in other countries affected by terrorism like Somalia, most notably Ethiopia, is in the throes of domestic and regional conflicts (including in Amhara) and is reducing its strength even in Somalia, limiting the effectiveness of regional response to security crises.

In addition, it has been found that issues of concern, including poor governance, festering conflicts between herders and farmers, rising unemployment, and lack of political stability, have failed to garner regional consensus regarding their redressal. Simultaneously, there has been little willingness to devote adequate attention and resources to address such challenges.

Finally, the domestic infrastructure and state apparatus in Burkina Faso and Mali are in a weakened position after years of political instability, the power struggle between civilian and military rulers, militancy and a dearth of economic growth. As a result, they have been unable to address the multifaceted challenges.

Conclusion

The governments in Burkina Faso and Mali have confronted obstacles in deterring or curbing terrorism for nearly a decade at great costs as fatalities—military and civilian—have continued rising. Moreover, Africa as a continent has experienced rising cases of terrorism-related incidents, including in Somalia, where Al-Shabaab, another Al-Qaeda affiliate, has inflicted significant chaos and violence. Local stakeholders and mercenary groups have proven largely ineffective in curbing the menace of terrorism for the past several years, while terrorist groups continue carrying out attacks simultaneously against military and civilian personnel. This has allowed parent organisations like the Al-Qaeda to retain their importance in

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[11] **"The African Standby Force"**, African Union, 26 February 2019.

[12] **"African Union Condemns 'Wave' of Military Coups"**, *DW*, 6 February 2022.

the global jihad discourse and use the emergence of Sahel as a global hotspot of terrorism to rejuvenate its ideological movement.

Finally, it is necessary to consider the Burkina Faso and Malian governments' increasing disenchantment with the former security partners (France), placing the culpability of escalating terrorism on Ukraine's shoulders[13] on the one hand and growing closeness with the Russian government and Russian mercenary groups. Notably, Andrei Belousov, Russia's Minister of Defence, announced[14] that discussions to expand Russia–Burkina Faso military ties have taken place. This follows Moscow's announcement about deploying instructors and supplies to bolster Burkina Faso's counter-terror campaign.

The accusations against Ukraine could be understood through their voting patterns in the United Nations[15] amid the Russia–Ukraine conflict, in which they have abstained or voted against resolutions concerning Ukraine. Additionally, since the Russia–Ukraine conflict broke out in 2022, Ukraine has been a benefactor of European and American (hostile to the military regimes in Sahel) support, diplomatically and militarily. These factors have collectively made multilateral cooperation, which is critical in a rapidly evolving threat landscape, seem implausible in addressing security concerns moving forward, leaving the regional actors in a lurch for the foreseeable future.

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[13] **"[Sahel Nations Accuse Ukraine of Backing Terrorism, Urge UN Action](#)"**, *Ecofin Agency*, 23 August 2024.

[14] **"[Russia, Burkina Faso Talk Military Cooperation](#)"**, *Reuters*, 9 October 2024.

[15] **"[Infographic: How Did African Countries Vote on Russia and Ukraine at the UN?](#)"**, *Development Reimagined*, February 2023.

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