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Issue Brief

Jihadism and the Neo-Colonial Great Game for Africa

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Summary

The 21st century jihadism has become the new scourge for Africa, which, in addition to its own violence, is giving a pretext for many Western, West Asian, Eurasian and Far Eastern powers to militarily intervene in the name of combating terrorism and then colonially plunder African natural resources.

Sub-Saharan Africa is currently the eye of the global jihadist storm, with the Sahel region (having countries like Burkina Faso, Niger and Nigeria) accounting for over half of terrorism-related fatalities worldwide.[1] As ISIS aggressively expands its terrorism across western Africa, with over two-thirds of its global activity now concentrated in the region, its major affiliate IS-Sahel (formerly Islamic State in the Greater Sahara—ISGS) and ISWAP (Islamic State in West African Province) now infest north-eastern Nigeria, Niger, Burkina Faso, Chad and Cameroon.[2]

In addition, a new ISIS affiliate in IS-DRC (formerly the Allied Democratic Forces—ADF) is wreaking havoc in eastern Congo. At the same time, another branch of the terror conglomerate, Ahlu Al-Sunnah wal-Jamaah (ASWJ), has increased its menace in Cabo Delgado Province in Mozambique and in southern Tanzania.[3] Meanwhile, Al-Qaeda's presence in Africa also continues to grow with its key affiliate, Jamaat Nusrat al Islam wal Muminin (JNIM), now reportedly threatening to overpower the military regime in Mali,[4] while forces of its eastern African affiliate Al-Shabaab are closing in on Mogadishu, by taking advantage of an ongoing dispute between Somalia's federal and state authorities.[5]

US Airstrikes in Nigeria

Ironically, military interventions by extra-regional powers to combat terrorism on the continent have arguably often harmed more than helped the cause of peace and security in Africa. For instance, US President Donald Trump delivered what he called an "amazing Christmas Gift" to the Lakurawa terrorists, said to be affiliated with ISIS, when he ordered airstrikes in the northern region of Nigeria on 25 December 2025.[6]

Calling the airstrikes a major blow to the "jihadist genocide of Christians" in Nigeria, Trump warned that the strikes might continue, and Nigerian officials found complicit in stoking the "genocide" would also face sanctions.[7] The Nigerian government and

[1] **"Global Terrorism Index 2025: Measuring the Impact of Terrorism"**, Institute for Economics & Peace, Sydney, March 2025.

[2] **"ISIS-West Africa (ISIS-WA)"**, Counter Terrorism Guide, April 2025.

[3] Niall Paltiel and Shama Shah, **"Ahlu Al-Sunnah wal-Jamaah: Understanding Mozambique's Growing Insurgency"**, The Counterterrorism Group, 12 April 2021.

[4] Haleigh Bartos and John Chin, **"Mali is at a Turning Point That Risks a 'Disastrous Domino Effect'"**, Atlantic Council, 25 November 2025.

[5] Matt Bryden, **"Somalia at Risk of Becoming a Jihadist State"**, Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 17 November 2025.

[6] Edward Helmore, **"Trump Supporters Hail US Strikes in Nigeria as 'Amazing Christmas Present"**, *The Guardian*, 26 December 2025.

[7] Laura Kelley, **"What to Know About Trump's Military Threats in Nigeria Over Christian Persecution"**, The Hill, 11 March 2025.

even noted security experts have objected to Trump's characterisation of the terror mass killings in Nigeria as a "Christian genocide", stating that Boko Haram and al-Qaeda-linked groups target people of all faiths in Africa's most populous country.[8] It has even been suggested that US airstrikes might provide an excuse to jihadist forces to target more Christians to polarise and divide the nation and carve a wider sphere of influence.[9] Several eyewitness accounts suggest that the airstrikes largely impacted "empty farmlands", even as the claim of the Lakurawa bandits having links with ISIS has been contested.[10]

Meanwhile, some Nigerian commentators have expressed dismay at President Trump's threat on 5 February 2026 to undertake further military action in Nigeria. Despite calling the wife of Nigerian President Remi Tinubu a "very respectable" lady at a function in Washington, Trump criticised the Nigerian government for its alleged violations of religious freedoms. It is noteworthy that Remi Tinubu is currently an ordained pastor in the Redeemed Christian Church of God, despite being married to President Ahmad Tinubu, who is Muslim, which attests to Nigeria's composite mainstream culture.[11]

Meanwhile, security experts like Kabir Adamu (CEO of Beacon Security and Intelligence of Nigeria) aver that the immediate cause for the US' airstrikes to counter decades-long terrorist killings in Nigeria might be an implicit response to Abuja's recent decision to commission two Chinese-funded major lithium processing plants in the country.[12]

Popular Scepticism over Counter-Terrorism Interventions

In fact, several North African governments have expressed their concerns over growing Western military interventions in their region on the pretext of combating terrorism in recent years. The seeds of jihadist violence in Africa started sprouting in the late 1980s and particularly after the end of Soviet-era communism that had historically fuelled insurgencies against Western imperialism across the continent.

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[8] **"Nigeria Rejects Claim of Christian Genocide as Trump Mulls Military Action"**, *Al Jazeera*, 2 November 2025.

[9] Pius Adeleye, **"Nigerian Airstrikes: US Bombing Gifts Propaganda Victory to Jihadists"**, *The Africa Report*, 2 January 2026.

[10] Nosmot Gbadamosi, **"Trump's Claims About Nigeria Strikes Don't Hold Up"**, *Foreign Policy*, 14 January 2026.

[11] Taofeek Oyedokun, **"'Very Respected Woman', Trump Praises Remi Tinubu at US Prayer Breakfast in Washington"**, *Business Day*, 5 February 2026.

[12] Isaac Anyaogu, **"Nigeria to Open Two Chinese-backed Lithium Processing Plants This Year"**, *Reuters*, 26 May 2025.

In fact, Al-Qaeda left major footprints in Sudan and the Maghreb in the early 1990s. Still, the present spread of jihadist terror across Sub-Saharan Africa metastasised after the overthrow of the Gaddafi regime in Libya following the Arab Spring of 2011. At that time, many radical Tuareg mercenaries looted Libya's arms depot. They flooded these weapons into Mali and other Sahel states, which then engendered Al-Qaeda and ISIS affiliates like Jama'a Nusratul Islam wa al-Muslimin (JNIM), Boko Haram, Islamic State of the Greater Sahara (ISGS) and Islamic State of West Africa Province (ISWAP).

As if jihadist violence was not a big menace in itself, the brazen re-entry of French forces (the erstwhile colonial power) in the Sahel region in early 2010s with counter-terrorism offensives like Operation Sabre (2009), Serval (2012–2014) Epervier (1986–2014), Takuba (2020–2022) and Barkhane (2014–2022), engendered much resentment in the region. Some Sahel regimes interpreted these counter-terrorism military operations as *Françafrique* (a term associated in Africa with French 'neo-colonialism').[13]

Even Italian leaders, from Silvio Berlusconi to the present Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, have criticised the post-Arab Spring French interventions in Sahel states and accused Paris of exploiting African resources to revive France's own fledgling economy, especially after the 2008–11 financial meltdown.[14]

It is noteworthy that Sahelian countries such as Niger, Mali, Chad, Burkina Faso and Mauritania are rich in petroleum, uranium, gold and rare-earth minerals. Last year, Niger's military regime nationalised the Somaïr uranium mine, which deprived France's Orano company of its controlling stake after its mining permits were revoked. Niger accused Orano of taking a disproportionate share of production (claiming 86.3 per cent since 1971) and of acting illegally.[15]

In addition to the charge of robbing Africa of its mineral resources, former Prime Minister of Mali's military-led transitional government, Choguel Kokalla Maïga, accused France of training "terrorist" groups in the northern town of Kidal in 2021.[16] France strongly denied any such allegations and stressed its military intervention was strictly to quell armed uprisings. Russia, Turkey and Italy also played significant roles in opposing or undermining French influence in the Sahel. Italian Prime

[13] "Since political independence, France has maintained a privileged sphere of influence—the so-called '*pré carré*'—in sub-Saharan Africa, based on a series of family-like ties with its former colonies." See Tony Chafer, **"Chirac and 'la Françafrique': No Longer a Family Affair"**, *Modern & Contemporary France*, No. 13, 2005, pp. 7–23.

[14] Emma Wallis, **"Deliberate Provocation or Fair Point? What's Behind the Latest Italian-French Spat Over Fuelling Migration?"**, *Info Migrants*, 22 January 2019.

[15] **"Niger to Nationalise Uranium Mine Operated by French State-affiliated Firm"**, *Al Jazeera*, 20 June 2025.

[16] **"Mali Accuses France of Training 'Terrorists' in the Country"**, *Al Jazeera*, 8 October 2021.

Minister Meloni stated that by maintaining the "colonial currency" (the CFA franc) in 14 African nations, France was still exploiting its former African colonies, thereby driving migration into Europe.[17]

Facing such intense criticism, France finally withdrew its forces from Mali in 2022, Burkina Faso in 2023, Niger in 2023, and Chad in early 2025. It has also withdrawn forces from the Central African Republic, the Ivory Coast and Senegal. However, it is worrying to note that these Western African states are now relying upon other extra-regional powers to fight terrorism at their behest, such as the Russian private army Wagner Group and the neo-Ottoman Turkish forces. Yet the number of jihadist killings and large-scale destruction has not only continued, but has reached an all-time high in the prevailing confusion. It is estimated by the Global Terrorism Index (GTI) that the overall conflict deaths in the region have risen to over 25,000 deaths, the first time since the Index started computing in 2012.[18]

The Fight for Sudan and the Horn of Africa

In adjacent Sudan, the ongoing civil war between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) since 2023 has created a security vacuum, which it is feared might allow terrorist groups like Al-Qaeda and ISIS from the Sahel to set up bases in that country. Last year, ISIS made a call to arms for Sudan against the RSF militia and also urged foreign fighters to migrate to Sudan and make war.[19]

ISIS has since made several online calls to jihadists to move to Sudan, which has raised fears that a new wave of unmitigated terror could worsen the country's civil war and spiralling humanitarian crisis. The ongoing Sudanese civil war has already claimed over 150,000 lives since 2023, and there is apprehension that the unruly country might soon serve as a land bridge for Al-Qaeda and ISIS affiliates in Sub-Saharan Africa to establish direct links with their counterparts like Al-Shabaab, IS-DRC and Ahlu Al-Sunnah wa Al-Jamaat in central and eastern Africa.

There are also apprehensions that Iran and its Shia proxy militias in West Asia are increasing cooperation with Al-Shabaab in East Africa, and the prospect of Iran extending its influence with other Al-Qaeda organisations even as far as West Africa cannot be discounted. According to Abu Dhabi-based Emirates Policy Centre: "Iran wants to recruit Al-Shabaab and link it to other Iranian-sponsored movements in

[17] Shaurya Thapa, **"Italy's New PM Giorgia Meloni Once Said France is Still Exploiting its African Colonies. How Right is She?"**, *Daily O*, 23 November 2022.

[18] **"Global Terrorism Index 2025: Measuring the Impact of Terrorism"**, Institute for Economics & Peace, Sydney, March 2025.

[19] Caleb Weiss, **"Analysis: Islamic State Redoubles Call for Jihad in Sudan, Urges Foreign Fighters to Migrate"**, *FDD's The Long War Journal*, 31 October 2025.

West Africa … Iran hopes to extend its influence from the Sahara to the Somali coast".[20]

On 11 October 2024, a UN letter established growing convergences between Salafi Al-Qaeda groups in Yemen and Somalia with the Shia Ansarallah in Yemen, commonly known as Houthis. The letter points out that

> the increasing collaboration between the Houthis and terrorist groups like Al-Qaida in the Arab Peninsula is concerning. Both have agreed to cease hostilities, transfer weapons, and coordinate attacks against the forces of the Government of Yemen. In addition, increased smuggling activities involving small arms and light weapons are observed between the Houthis and Al-Shabaab, with indications of shared military supplies or a common supplier.[21]

The civil war in Sudan could thus provide the opportunity to Al-Qaeda and ISIS jihadists to set up bases in that country, possibly serving as a land bridge joining eastern and western African affiliates of these terror groups.

With the entry of forces backed by Russia, Turkey, Israel, Iran and China into the African theatre, the Great Game could extend its menace to other West Asian flashpoints—Yemen, Syria, Iraq and even Iran. Curiously, the main Sudanese forces involved in the civil war today themselves have old jihadist roots, connecting to Osama bin Laden himself. Despite denials by the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF), led by Abdel Fattah Al Burhan, evidence indicates that members of the former Sudanese Islamist leader Bashir's National Congress Party (NCP) and affiliated paramilitaries are now serving within SAF ranks.

Once, the followers of Hassan Al Turabi (the ideological guru of Bin Laden), these jihadist elements in SAF are now aligned with Qatar,[22] Turkiye, Russia, Egypt and Iran[23] while the rival RSF is allegedly receiving support from the UAE, Israel,[24]

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[20] **"The Growing Relationship between Iran and al-Shabab Movement in Somalia: Motives and Potential Consequences"**, Horn of Africa Studies Unit, Emirates Policy Center, 27 July 2020.

[21] **"Letter dated 11 October 2024 from the Panel of Experts on Yemen Addressed to the President of the Security Council"**, S/2024/731, United Nations Security Council, 11 October 2024.

[22] Noé Hochet-Bodin and Eiad Husham, **"Doha's Discreet Military Support for Sudanese Armed Forces"**, *Africa Intelligence: The Continent's Daily*, 14 October 2025.

[23] Jennifer Holleis, **"Sudan War: Could Involved Foreign Powers Stop the War There?"**, *DW*, 31 October 2025; **"Turkey Delivers Advanced Drones to Egypt for Sudan Operations"**, *The Jerusalem Post*, 3 February 2026.

[24] William N. Robinson, **"Blood and Business: The Israel-UAE Nexus Fuelling Sudan's War"**, *The New Arab*, 13 November 2025.

Ethiopia[25] and Haftar's Libyan forces.[26] Although the US is making efforts to establish a Sudanese ceasefire mechanism, the scramble among extra-regional powers backing their proxies in Sudan to gain access to the country's immense gold and mineral resources, its fertile agricultural land, and control over the vital Bab Al Mandeb Strait remains intense.

The Red Sea and the 'Ben Gurion Canal'

Further confounding crises around the Red Sea/Horn of Africa region is Israel's recent recognition of Somaliland. Being the first country to give recognition to the breakaway republic from Somalia, its decision has reignited questions about the controversial proposal made by American and Israeli officials for Somaliland to take in Palestinians displaced from Gaza.[27] There is also speculation that Israel might use Somaliland as a base to stave off Houthi attacks from just across the Gulf of Aden and also to upgrade the port of Berbara to allegedly provide its landlocked ally, Ethiopia, access to the Red Sea.[28]

Arab media reports also claim a secret Israeli plan to build a so-called Ben Gurion Canal through the Port of Eilat on the Gulf of Aqaba, which would then pass through the Arabah Valley (possibly even through northern Gaza) and link to Israel's Mediterranean port of Ashkelon.[29] This proposed 293-km, US$ 16–US$ 55 billion maritime route has allegedly upset Egypt and other Arab states of the region.[30]

China in Djibouti and Tanzania

Meanwhile, the world's second-largest economy, China, is also busy securing its strategic trade routes, seeking access to critical minerals and expanding its investment and market opportunities in Africa (particularly in the Horn of Africa). Anchored by its first overseas naval base, built in 2017 near its Doraleh Multi-

[25] Giulia Paravicini and Reade Levinson, **"'Ethiopia Builds Secret Camp to Train Sudan RSF Fighters', Sources Say"**, *Reuters*, 10 February 2026.

[26] **"Sudanese Army Accuses Libya's Haftar of Joint Border Attack with RSF"**, *Al Jazeera*, 10 June 2025.

[27] Sam Metz and Omar Faruk, **"Israel's Recognition of Breakaway Somaliland Brings Uproar and Threats to a Volatile Region"**, *Associated Press*, 13 January 2026.

[28] Yonas Yizezew, **"Berbera and Beyond: Ethiopia in the Israel–Somaliland Nexus"**, *Saxafi Media*, 14 August 2025.

[29] Sarah Khalil, **"What is Israel's Ben Gurion Canal Plan and Why Gaza Matters"**, *The New Arab*, 17 November 2023.

[30] **"Egypt and China in Big Trouble as Israel Wants to Build Another Suez Canal"**, *India Shipping News*, 17 February 2026.

Purpose Port (DMP), China maintains a major strategic, economic and military presence in Djibouti.[31]

Further south in Tanzania, Chinese enclaves in Dar es Salaam and in the industrial area of Urafiki have self-contained residential and commercial zones for Chinese businessmen and workers, as Tanzania is central to China's push to secure access to Africa's copper belt. In this respect, China has signed a US$ 1.4 billion agreement to revamp the TAZARA (Tanzania–Zambia Railway Authority) project. This 1,860 km railway line connects the port of Dar es Salaam in Tanzania to Kapiri Mposhi in Zambia's Copperbelt. According to Amarachi Orjiude-Nedibe: "The (TAZARA) project is widely seen as a strategic alternative to the US and EU-backed Lobito Corridor, which connects Zambia and the Democratic Republic of Congo to Atlantis ports through Angola."[32]

In this Great Game involving major global powers, the entry of jihadist groups, like the IS-DRC in Congo and another ISIS-affiliate Ahlas Sunnah Al Jamaah (ASWJ) in Mozambique and Tanzania's southern Mtwara region, is impeding the progress of African states.[33] Again, Somalia's Al Shabaab has also increased its sphere of influence and has intensified its attacks in neighbouring states of Kenya, Ethiopia and Uganda.[34]

Thus, 21st century jihadism has become the new scourge for Africa, which, in addition to its own violence, is giving a pretext for many Western, West Asian, Eurasian and Far Eastern powers to militarily intervene in the name of combating terrorism and then colonially plunder African natural resources all over again. Meanwhile, Europe has good reason to be alarmed by the massive immigrant influx from Africa, as it was Carthage, now Tunisia, from where the migrant Vandals gave the final blow to ancient Rome in 455CE.

[31] Mandip Singh, **"Port de Djibouti: China's First Permanent Naval Base in the Indian Ocean"**, Issue Brief, Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (MP-IDSA), 22 February 2016.

[32] Amarchi Orjiunde-Ndibe, **"China Deepens East Africa Ties as Global Trade Risks Rise"**, *Finance in Africa*, 7 January 2026.

[33] Ladd Serwatt, Heni Nasabia, Miriam Ada and Peter Bofin, **"The Islamic State's Pivot to Africa"**, ACLED, 4 September 2025.

[34] **"What's Next for the Fight Against al-Shabaab in Kenya and Somalia - August 2024"**, ACLED, 4 September 2024.

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