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Extremism in the Sahel: A Region in Crisis and the Search for New Allies

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Violent extremism has plagued the Sahel region, stretching from Senegal to Eritrea, with threats emanating from groups like Al-Qaeda and Islamic State affiliates such as the Islamic State in the Greater Sahel (ISGS), Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM), and Boko Haram. Terrorist factions present the most pertinent threat in the Lake Chad basin and the three-border region of Liptako-Gourma between Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger.¹ Violence has resulted in a dire humanitarian crisis, significant displacement, and a risk for widespread instability in neighboring countries. Several initiatives, like the regional G5 Joint Sahel Task Force or the French-led Operation Barkhane, have made attempts to curtail extremism; however, terrorism continues to threaten regional stability and international economic cooperation.

Rooting out extremism in the Sahel has emerged as a regional and international priority. Through Operation Barkhane, France deployed over five thousand troops in the Sahel to fight militants with the support of over fifteen thousand UN peacekeepers. Furthermore, in 2017, France put its weight behind the G5 Sahel Force between Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger, where member states' national forces cooperate to fight terrorists.

Such regional and international efforts have, however, failed to address the growing threat of violent extremism leading to widespread scrutiny about their effectiveness. In fact, throughout the conflict-torn region, rebel forces have grown in number as weak governance, perceived corruption, economic turmoil, and close affiliations with Western powers have driven civilians to join their ranks. Anti-west sentiment and failure to protect citizens from violence have contributed to the military coups in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger from 2020 to 2023. The deposed leaders were instrumental in supporting Operation Barkhane, notably President Bazoum of Niger who was one of the last leaders backed by Western allies in the Sahel, which soured his domestic reputation.²

The three military juntas expelled French forces from their countries throughout 2022 and 2023. Consequently, they withdrew from the G5 Sahel force to form the Association of the Sahel States, independent of Western influence. The decline of Western forces and the failure of regional initiatives have presented a vacuum for new partners to explore while also presenting opportunities for terrorists to attack vulnerable government forces and civilians. For instance, Russia's Wagner mercenary group has set its sights on vulnerable countries to instill peace while also working closely with the mineral industries in Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso.

As the Gulf states are increasing investment and engagement with African economies, it is clear that preserving peace and stability are paramount among their aims to protect investments. The commitments Saudi Arabia and the UAE have made to the G5 demonstrate their appetite to join the war on terror in Africa. In response to terrorist threats from the Sahel, Saudi Arabia inaugurated the Islamic Military Counter Terrorism Coalition (IMCTC) between 43 Arab and African member states, including Niger, Burkina Faso, and Mali. In 2017, the UAE and Saudi Arabia pledged nearly

¹ Center for Preventive Action. "[Violent Extremism in the Sahel](#)," *Council on Foreign Relations*, 3 Oct. 2024

² Lawal, Shola. "[Au Revoir, Sahel: Did 2023 Crush France's Influence in Africa?](#)" *Al Jazeera*, 31 Dec. 2023,



150 million USD to aid the G5 Joint Sahel Alliance,³ and reports in 2019 stated that the UAE was planning to open a military base in Niger.⁴

Furthermore, the IMCTC has held several talks and joint training missions with Sahel countries. Most recently, Secretary General Mohammed bin Saeed Al Moghedi, the chief of the IMCTC, met with Burkina Faso's Defence Minister Kassoum Coulibaly to discuss strengthening regional security. Furthermore, the IMCTC has implanted a counter-terrorism program that will train members of the Burkinabe military and deploy strategic assets to ensure stability.⁵ Secretary General Al Moghedi held a similar discussion with General Moussa Barmou, the Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces in Niger, and Bello Matawalle, Nigeria's Defence Minister.⁶ As such, Saudi Arabia is pursuing a more active role in deterring violent extremism in the Sahel.

The UAE is another viable partner in the war against terror in Africa as it has signed military cooperation agreements with Chad, Mali, and Mauritania and has supplied countries across the Sahel with military equipment and vehicles. Ensuing the military takeovers in the Sahel, the UAE forged security ties with the military juntas, demonstrating its pragmatic approach to fighting terrorism, regardless of the party in power.⁷

There is a danger for the violence to spread across Africa, especially due to the proliferation of anti-western sentiments in the Sahel. Burkina Faso shares a porous border with Northern Ghana, although there have not been direct attacks in Ghana. It has been alleged extremists use the region in the North as a logistical and equipment base. With Ghana's historical ties to Western countries and the unknown risks surrounding its upcoming election in December, it remains to be seen how it can continue to avert risks. At present, it does not have the necessary equipment in quality or quantity to present an adequate force to counter extremism.

Furthermore, the economic challenges engulfing ECOWAS countries make it costly to prioritise diverting funds away from more pressing issues, such as the energy crises in Ghana and Nigeria. ECOWAS members exposed the weakness of their forces when they threatened to impose military force to re-install deposed President Bazoum, a threat that was not adhered to. Thus, demonstrating the likelihood of soldiers entering neighbouring countries is futile, all while border security remains an important concern. The failures of the G5 Joint Task Force and ECOWAS expose the limitations of military capabilities in Western Africa and reiterate the urgency for security partners. With Gulf-led investments exceeding 100 billion USD in Africa, it is in their best interests to contain extremism wherever it emerges to protect their economic and political assets.

The current global climate presents an acute risk for the propensity of extremism. The devastating wars in Gaza and Lebanon serve as incubators for extremists as Western nations like the United

³ John Irish, "[Saudi-Backed Military Alliance to Help G5 Sahel Fight: Minister](#)," *Reuters*, December 14, 2017, .

⁴ Samuel Ramani, "[Who Benefits from Niger's Coup?](#)" *Foreign Policy*, August 2, 2023,

⁵ Saudi Press Agency. "[IMCTC Secretary General Meets with Burkina Faso's State Minister](#)." 15 Oct. 2024

⁶ Saudi Press Agency "[IMCTC Secretary General Receives Niger's Chief of Staff of Armed Forces](#)." 1 Sept. 2024

⁷ Ardemagni, Eleonora. "[The UAE's Rising Military Role in Africa: Defending Interests, Advancing Influence](#)." *ISPI*, 6 May 2024.



States continue to offer unwavering support to Israel, which can lead certain factions to exact a violent response across the world. Furthermore, the election of President-elect Donald J. Trump could make the United States focus more on domestic issues and grant less aid to conflict-torn countries. Regarding Africa, it is likely that President Trump will adhere to a more “transactional” approach as the US could prioritize trade and access to minerals rather than helping foreign countries combat threats.

All of the above combines to make the Sahel a region of increased instability with wider regional consequences. As such, regional and international actors must act to prevent further destabilization. Countries across the Sahel must address the root causes of extremism, including discontent with governance, economic instability, and unemployment, as extremist groups exploit these government failures to recruit civilians into their ranks. Military capabilities need urgent support from the international community through training programs and robust military equipment to counter terrorism. Gulf states like Saudi Arabia and the UAE should expand their counter-terrorism cooperation by leveraging initiatives like the IMCTC’s training programs in Niger and the UAE’s supply of military equipment across the Sahel. The Alliance of Sahel States demonstrates the quest for strategic alternatives and new allies on the international scene as has been the case for Russia, China, and Turkey.

In light of these shifts, ECOWAS and the G5 Sahel Force should reduce their appearance of reliance on Western countries to gain credibility within local populations or at least undergo internal restructuring to be in tune with the regional sentiments. The international community must interact with these countries in a way that is seen as mutually beneficial or steer more of their efforts towards the private sector. With President Faye of Senegal calling for France to close its bases in Senegal yet still inviting French companies to invest, this could chart a new path for future collaborations between the West and African countries, especially those in the Sahel.

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