Foreign Powers and Counter-Terrorism Operations in the Sahel Region

The regional balance of power and the overall political situation in the Sahel region has undergone radical changes since the Arab Spring. The February Revolution in Libya, which led to the overthrow and death of Libyan leader, Muammar al-Gaddafi in October 2011, created a power vacuum that contributed to the spread of extremist groups in the Western Sahel that threatens stability in the region. Gaddafi's violent removal, after 42 years in power, empowered the Tuareg separatist movement in Mali. Moreover, ethnic Tuareg soldiers who had been part of the Libyan army returned to Mali. Salafi-jihadis joined in, playing an important role in the 2012 Tuareg uprising in Mali which eventually led to the capture of Timbuktu, Gao, and Kidal. The Salafi-jihadis were ultimately defeated, and the Islamic Emirate of Azawad split.

The Sahel region entered into a deep multidimensional crisis after the eruption of the Malian conflict in 2012. Violent groups affiliated with Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State have spread from Central Mali to neighboring Burkina Faso and Niger, while Boko Haram has made incursions into Southern Niger from Nigeria. Despite the military presence of Western countries in the region, the threat of international terrorism continues to increase. The weight of regional instability that has spread in recent years to Mali, Niger, northern Nigeria, the Central African Republic, Burkina Faso, and even Benin has necessitated a deep analysis of the causes and consequences of the current crisis in the region. Particular attention, in this context, is the effectiveness of the strategies of extra-regional players in the field of security, key of which is the collective West – which includes the United States and France. Given the above, a pertinent question that deserves an answer is: is there a possible military and political solution to insecurity in the Sahel following the unsuccessful counter-terrorism operations by the collective West?

Terrorism in the Sahel Region

The persistent and growing strength of violent extremist organizations in the Sahel threatens to exacerbate the humanitarian crisis and spread of instability across Africa, posing significant security risks and developmental challenges in the region. In a region prone to political violence and conflict in the Liptako-Gourma and the Lake Chad Basin, the disruptions have led to more dramatic long-term security consequences and could still do more damage if not addressed. Counter-terrorism and security approaches that have so far been used in the Sahel have failed to sustainably strengthen the Sahelian states. Arguably, efforts by the government of the conflict-affected countries in the Sahel to halt the increasing violence of Boko Haram/Islamic State in West Africa (ISWA), Jamaʻat Nasr al-Islam wal Muslim in (JNIM), and other terrorist groups have so far not yielded the expected result that would translate to peace, stability, and development.

Given the complex interplay between external intervention, indiscriminate attacks by armed groups and militias, insecurity, climate change, food insecurity, and widespread lack of socioeconomic opportunities, the security situation in the Sahel continues to worsen despite an increase in stabilization efforts. Following the fall of Gaddafi and its overreaching effect in the region, European and other international partners have multiplied their interventions in an attempt to stabilize the region and contain the advance of violent extremist groups, especially after France's successful 2013 Serval operation in Mali. Yet, the number of violent attacks on civilians, state infrastructure, and the military continues to rise.

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Unarguably, the conflict situation in the Sahel has created one of the fastest-growing displacement crises in the world, reaching new heights in 2022 with more than 2.9 million refugees and internally displaced people across Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger and an emerging trend of Burkinabe seeking asylum southward and northward, including in North Africa and Europe. An estimated 3.7 million people have been internally displaced, and more than 10 million children in the Sahel are in dire need of humanitarian assistance, as of 2022. Key findings from the Global Terrorism Index 2024 report indicate that the epicenter of terrorism has shifted out of the Middle East into the Central Sahel region of sub-Saharan Africa, which now accounts for over half of all deaths from terrorism. The Sahel is now the most impacted region, representing 43% of global terrorism deaths, 7% more than the year before. The report recorded that four of the 10 countries most affected by terrorism in 2023 are in the Sahel region.

It is important to note that the UNDP programme in 2016 identified Mali as an epicenter of violent extremism and Niger as the potential spill-over country in this region, while Burkina Faso was not even identified as "a risk". But today, Burkina Faso has surpassed Afghanistan as the country most impacted by terrorism. Its rate increased from 1,135 to 1,907, a 68 per cent increase – the largest global increase. As reflected in the Global Terrorism Index 2024, it ranks first in the list of countries most impacted by terrorism, while Mali moved from fourth in 2023 to third in 2024, and Niger was at the tenth spot on the latest index. For example, in 2023, Northwestern Burkina Faso, near the country's borders with Niger and Mali, experienced the most terror attacks, accounting for almost half of all attacks in 2023. Of Burkina Faso's 1,907 deaths in 2023, 1,000 of the deadliest attack occurred along the Niger border in Centre-Nord and East. On the other hand, the fall in terrorism deaths in 2023 in Mali, i.e. a seven per cent drop in attacks and a 20 per cent drop in deaths in comparison to 2022, could be attributed to the presence and collaboration between the Malian military and Wagner Group forces from Russia in the country. Though, Mali's border with Burkina Faso and Niger continues to be the area most impacted by terrorism, with 60 per cent of attacks occurring in this region. However, terrorism appears to be spreading towards Mali's western provinces, with deaths in the Koulikoro and Segou regions. In Gao, which shares a border with both Niger and Burkina Faso, terrorism increased significantly as the region recorded the most deaths in 2023 at 255. Although this is almost half the fatalities recorded in the region in 2022, deaths in Mopti mirrored this trend, falling from 311 to 235 in 2023.

Terrorism in Niger experienced a surge in 2023 after a decline in 2022. The number of terrorist attacks increased to 61 in 2023, up from 54 in the previous year. Deaths more than doubled, with 468 deaths in 2023 compared to 193 deaths in 2022, indicating a significant escalation in the lethality of attacks. Military personnel accounted for 73 per cent of these casualties, resulting in Niger becoming the country with the third-highest military death toll in 2023. The Tillabéri region recorded the highest number of attacks and deaths. This region is in the unstable tri-border area shared with Mali and Burkina Faso, and has been hit hard by the Islamic insurgency in Central Sahel. Terrorist attacks occurred in seven of Niger's eight regions, with Tillaberi recording 59 per cent of the country's terrorist attacks and 84 per cent of casualties.

Foreign Powers and Counter-terrorism Operations in the Sahel region

Since 2012, several security operations have taken place in the Sahel, involving foreign countries – the United States, France, China, Russia, etc. Over the years, Sahel countries have received substantial U.S. security assistance under the Trans-Sahara Counter-terrorism Partnership (TSCTP) policy instrument. The presence of the United States in the region could officially be traced to the launch of its small-scale counter-terrorism policy in West Africa and the Maghreb pan-Sahel Initiative in late 2002, which became part of the larger Trans-Sahara Counter-terrorism Initiative (TSCTI) in 2005 and the Trans-Sahara Counter-terrorism Partnership (TSCTP) in 2008. These counter-terrorism initiatives aimed to support diplomacy, development, and military activities in combating Islamic extremism in nine countries: Chad, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Senegal, and Nigeria (Burkina Faso was added in 2009). The TSCTP for instance mobilizes U.S. 'government resources from a variety of sources, including the State Department, the Department of Defense, and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID)'.

In the Sahel, the U.S. has been involved in counter-terrorism operations primarily through its support for the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) and the G5 Sahel Joint Force. It has provided training, intelligence, and logistical support to these regional forces. In May 2014, the U.S. gave assistance to Chad in the search for Nigerian

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schoolgirls kidnapped by Boko Haram, took part, in 2017, in a military exercise in Chad with the regional forces, gave limited training mission for Nigerian soldiers in April 2018, conducted reconnaissance operations in support of the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) fight against Boko Haram in Cameroon in August 2018, amongst others. However, the effectiveness of these efforts has been limited, as terrorist groups continue to operate and carry out attacks in the region.

As a former colonial power in the region, France has been leading the counter-terrorism efforts in the Sahel through its Operation Barkhane. In 2014, France launched Operation Barkhane to combat terrorism and stabilize the Sahel region. The operation involves thousands of French troops deployed across five countries: Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Chad, and Mauritania. The operation aims to disrupt and degrade terrorist networks, provide security assistance to local forces, and support development initiatives. However, despite French efforts, the security situation in the Sahel has worsened, with terrorist groups, such as Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM), and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) expanding their operations and gaining control over larger territories. Up until the current expulsion of French troops following the trails of coups in the Sahel region, France was assessed as the sole provider of legitimate security in its former colonies. Before the campaign that trailed the expulsion of France troops, it had been firmly engaged in the fight against terrorism in the Sahel region through different operations such as Reinforcement of African Capacities for Peacekeeping Operations (RECAMP) – Renforcement des capacitésafricaines de maintien de la Paix, Operation Serval, Operation Barkhane, the Takuba Initiative as well as cooperation with the G5 Sahel forces aimed at countering terrorism forces in the Sahel region.

Despite the increase of French presence in the area, military successes were limited. According to Global Terrorism Index (2023) "in 2022, terrorism deaths in the Sahel accounted for 43 per cent of total terrorism deaths globally, compared to just one per cent in 2007". Over the past five years, statistics have shown that the Sahel region has experienced a significant increase in the number of terror attacks and fatalities. Compared to how the security of the Sahel was before the intervention of France, the Sahel is now the epicenter of global terrorism. Would it have been better if France had not intervened? Relations between a few Sahel states and France have deteriorated in recent years, with Operation Barkhane criticized for failing to stem the tide of jihadist insurgency. Mali's junta pushed out France's anti-jihadist force in 2022, and the UN peacekeeping mission MINUSMA in 2023. French troops have also been pushed out of Burkina Faso, while Niger's coup leaders have not only expelled French troops but renounced several military cooperation agreements with France.

A Possible Military and Political Solution to Insecurity in the Sahel

The countries of the Sahel region have recognized that the fate of their security is intertwined and requires a collective approach to security threats – which led to the formation of the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) by Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. A comprehensive collaboration between the AES and the MNJTF is therefore an alternative worth considering and implementing as a military option to addressing insecurity in the Sahel. Furthermore, there is a need for coordinated and collective approaches by the African Union (AU)/the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) to effectively respond to dynamic and hybrid security threats. In the spirit of finding "African solutions to African problems", there has been an increasing demand for ECOWAS and indeed AU-led military operations in the Sahel.

Negotiation between the warring parties in the Sahel is a possible political solution to insecurity in the region. Between 1994 and 2004, Niger recorded a ceasefire and signed an agreement between the warring parties and the state, which was mediated by the French, Algerian government, and Burkinabe mediators. In 2021, there was an alleged secret peace talks between Burkina Faso's government and the jihadists, which led to a fragile jihadist ceasefire. In 2015, there was a signed peace agreement between the Malian government and the Coordination of Azawad Movements (CMA) fighters (a coalition of predominantly Tuareg rebels in the Northern region of Mali). The goal of this signed peace agreement initiated in May and June 2015 was to pursue a political settlement between the Malian government and the Coordination of Azawad Movements (CMA) fighters. The agreement broke the status quo between the elected government and the rebel groups, and prompted a resumption of the political process for a negotiated resolution of the conflict.

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Three notable key steps in the peace process are (a) the installation in April 2012 of an interim government that ensured the country's leadership until August 2013; (b) the conclusion on 18 June 2013 of a preliminary peace agreement that enabled the holding of free and transparent elections leading to a new legitimate government; and (c) the negotiation of a comprehensive peace agreement that was officially endorsed by the parties to the political conflict on 15 May and 20 June 2015. Five years after its signing, an evaluation of the agreement showed that 22 per cent of the agreement's provisions had been put into effect in 2017, compared to 23 per cent three years later (2020). None of the agreement's five pillars were reported to have been satisfactorily applied. Nevertheless, the peace agreement could be replicated in other countries in the Sahel, backed by political will to implement the letter and spirit of the agreement.

Evidently, the regional balance of power and the overall political situation in the Sahel region has undergone radical changes. During the last two decades, the Sahel has illustrated some of the main political trends characterizing the evolution of counter-terrorism in highly unstable and conflict-prone areas. Far from being an issue based on foreign powers' counter-terrorism operations, the Sahel reminds us that counter-terrorism is a sensitive and essentially political field of action. Hence, to be successful at drastically reducing terrorism and instability in the region, a possible alternative to the unsuccessful counter-terrorism operations by the collective West, may require military collaboration between the AES and the MNJTF, the leadership of the AU/ECOWAS, and possibly the political solution of a peace agreement.

About the author:

Dr. Stephen Osaherumwen Idahosa has a PhD in International Relations and Foreign Policy from the Peoples' Friendship University of Russia (RUDN University). He is a Foreign Service Officer in Nigeria's Ministry of Foreign Affairs.