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ANALYSIS

Counterterrorism Shortcomings in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger

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BOTTOM LINE

- **Although designated as foreign terrorist organizations by the U.S. Department of State in 2018, the two primary Salafi-jihadi groups in the Sahel—al-Qaeda affiliate Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin, and the Islamic State–Sahel Province—are primarily insurgent groups. Rather than targeting civilians to provoke a broader societal change under a strategy of terrorism, they mostly target security forces to gain control of territory, which is evidence of a strategy of insurgency. They employ terrorism tactically to further their goal of eliminating Western influence and establishing an Islamist state.**

- **The insurgencies directly threaten the survival of Sahelian countries—Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger—and the stability of coastal West Africa. They also pose an international terrorism threat, as their success benefits the parent organizations, al-Qaeda and the Islamic State; both continue to plan**

international terrorist attacks, particularly against Western countries. Successful insurgencies provide them with financial and recruitment benefits and create opportunities for foreign jihadists to train and plan operations.

- **Therefore, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger must shift their strategic approach toward the escalating insurgencies. Rather than pursuing a predominantly counterterrorism strategy of killing or capturing jihadists, they should adopt more counterinsurgency measures to address the drivers of the insurgencies, in particular the lack of security and governance.**

- **Counterinsurgency measures should prioritize the following: clearing and holding territory, expanding international cooperation, increasing government presence in rural areas, and negotiating with jihadist groups to encourage demobilization.**

Policy Problem

As the global epicenter of Salafi-jihadi activity, the Sahel in 2023 accounted for 26 percent of global terrorist attacks, which caused 47 percent of terrorist-related deaths. Burkina Faso is ranked as the country most affected by terrorism in the world, followed by Mali in third place and Niger in tenth. Both would be one spot higher if not for Hamas's October 2023 attacks in Israel. These standings show the prevalence and lethality of jihadist groups in the Sahel. The situation has not always been this dire. After Malian and French security forces regained control of northern Mali from jihadists in 2014, terrorist attacks were infrequent. There was little evidence of insurgencies until 2016. However, jihadist activity rose steadily from 2017 until 2021, and since 2021, jihadist attacks have doubled and resulting deaths have tripled. Mali has little control over its northern regions and is constantly contested in its central regions. Jihadist groups control or contest over half of Burkina Faso. In all three countries, jihadists are encircling areas closer to the capitals. Attacks have spread to coastal countries Benin, Togo, and Côte d'Ivoire. Thus, jihadist groups have reconstituted since their 2014 setback to wage escalating insurgencies and conduct complex terrorist attacks.

Origins

The sources of the current insurgencies are ethnic tensions and weak governments. The Sahel is very diverse, which creates competing interests; several ethnic groups make their livelihoods in ways that conflict with each other. For example, many Fulani, a primarily Muslim ethnic group residing throughout West Africa, rely on livestock herding, which often leads to conflicts with groups that rely on agriculture such as the Dogon and Mossi. This has caused the oppression of some groups at the hands of others, which sometimes is either ignored or encouraged by their governments. Therefore, parts of the population distrust the government's intentions, a view furthered by the government's inability to provide basic services. Sahelian governments have historically taken an elite-centric approach, developing capitals while neglecting rural areas. This has created ungoverned spaces where the government is not present, especially in border areas. A variety of criminal and insurgent groups render these areas insecure. Thus, the populations in many areas outside of the capitals view their government as indifferent and, when it is present, ineffective and ill-intentioned. Jihadist groups view this shortcoming as an opportunity to control territory by providing security and governance.

With the drivers of the jihadist insurgencies in place, the Libyan and Malian civil wars sparked them beginning in 2011 and 2012. Armed Tuareg, a primarily Muslim, pastoralist ethnic group historically marginalized in the Sahel, began pushing Malian security forces out of northern Mali in early 2012. An assortment of jihadist groups both directly and loosely affiliated with al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb opportunistically joined the fight. A massive proliferation of arms smuggled from unguarded Libyan depots after Muammar Qaddafi's fall aided them. Jihadist groups quickly assumed control of territory and established a proto-caliphate that included the regional capital, Timbuktu. They provided security and governance, complete with justice and education systems. When French and Malian security forces pushed them out during Operation Serval (2013–14), jihadist groups spent multiple years regrouping in ungoverned spaces like the cross-border areas of Mali, Niger, and Algeria. They accessed arms easily and recruited militants from still-marginalized ethnic groups. They funded their activity through crimes such as drug and contraband smuggling and kidnapping; ransom payment is one of their primary sources of income. They increased attacks throughout 2015 and 2016, eventually beginning another insurgency.

JNIM vs. ISSP

The wide range of jihadist groups consolidated in 2017, becoming Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM)—the Support Group for Islam and Muslims—and pledging allegiance to al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb and al-Qaeda central. This merger formalized ties between groups and increased their geographical reach to Burkina Faso and Niger. The U.S. Department of State subsequently designated JNIM as a foreign terrorist organization in 2018. One of the merged groups is Katiba Macina, and a closely affiliated group is Ansarul Islam; both are Fulani-dominated, the former operating in central Mali and the latter in Burkina Faso. The inclusion of the Fulani is vital, as they are populous but have been historically marginalized across the Sahel due to their pastoralism. This has put them in conflict with sedentary farming communities. While JNIM is still led and heavily influenced by the Tuareg, it is more diverse and decentralized than the groups in 2012. This allows it to navigate ethnic tensions and recruit more broadly from the population of the Sahel.

The other predominant jihadist group is the Islamic State–Sahel Province (ISSP). Formed from JNIM splinter groups, ISSP pledged allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi after he declared an Islamic State caliphate. The U.S. Department of State also designated the group as a foreign terrorist organization in 2018. Although JNIM initially remained the primary jihadist actor in the Sahel, ISSP has drastically increased its activity since 2020; this is why it was recently named an Islamic State province. Both groups have the same goals: to eliminate secular and Western influence, and to establish an Islamist state in West Africa. However, differences between their central organizations have disrupted collaboration and caused conflict. Al-Qaeda favors a localized approach to jihad that can bridge ethnic tensions and gradually implement Islamic law. The Islamic State favors a universal approach that targets alleged non-believers and rapidly implements maximalist Islamic law. ISSP has justified "war" against JNIM due to the latter's "apostate leaders," specifically when it comes to their more permissive approach to civilians and Christians. Conflict has been sporadic; in late 2023, ISSP pushed JNIM out of the Menaka region of Mali. They are both prevalent in the tri-border area of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. JNIM is more prevalent in Mali and Burkina Faso, while ISSP is so in Niger. Thus, JNIM and ISSP are waging simultaneous insurgencies that clash intermittently.

A Strategy of Insurgency

While these jihadists are often portrayed as terrorists in Western media, they are primarily insurgents who employ terrorism tactically. If they had a strategy of terrorism, jihadists would mostly target civilians; their goal would be to shock the government into a policy change, provoke repression, or instigate political and societal disorder. Instead, their activity is aligned with a strategy of insurgency; they mainly target security forces with the goal of controlling territory and governing. Jihadists target security forces using a variety of means, including ambushes, base raids, and the use of improvised explosive devices. By increasing the human and resource costs of holding territory, they compel security forces to limit their activities or pull out altogether. For example, there are hardly any security forces present in the problematic tri-border area of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger anymore.

Since 2014, jihadists have avoided large-scale, conventional battles for control of population centers. However, this does not mean they are satisfied with controlling mostly rural areas. Rather, they besiege the centers to gradually pressure and delegitimize security forces at little cost to themselves. JNIM has done this in Timbuktu since August 2023, while ISSP has done so in Menaka since May 2023. They are taking a lower-risk, long-term approach; their goal is to drive out security forces and persuade a weary population to accept their governance. In areas that jihadist groups control or contest, they move quickly to establish forms of governance. Their activities include levying taxes, regulating and controlling businesses, operating courts, and providing services like education and healthcare. Because many areas did not have effective or any government presence, civilians often view jihadist groups as more just and effective than the government.

Most terrorist attacks are meant to coerce civilians or undermine the government in localities jihadist groups control or hope to control. JNIM targets events, offices, schools, and infrastructure if it believes the target is in violation of its Islamist beliefs. It also targets civilians suspected of collaborating with the government. JNIM balances governance by fear with localized governance; it wants to be perceived as a just, responsive governing entity by civilians. In practice, this consists of co-opting local leaders and promoting cohesion between ethnic groups by arbitrating disputes. In exchange, they adhere to broader JNIM directives. This arrangement helps JNIM's recruitment because it is viewed as a protector of marginalized groups. ISSP relies on governance by fear, coercing civilians to adhere to its maximalist Islamist beliefs. This is done through public demonstrations of force,

including executions and amputations. The emphasis on force has attracted Fulanis seeking reprisals against ethnic militias, including those affiliated with the Dogon and Mossi.

Jihadists have also conducted traditional terrorist attacks in the Sahel and coastal West Africa, including bombing hotels frequented by Westerners. This contributes to their goal of eliminating Western influence because it intimidates Westerners and related businesses. It also draws attention to the worldwide cause of their parent organizations, al-Qaeda and ISIS. More attention can attract more recruits and fundraising. However, jihadist groups are not relying on terrorist attacks to overthrow Sahelian governments or induce concessions to establish an Islamist state. That is what their insurgencies are intended to do.

Significance

These escalating insurgencies pose a threat to several actors, chiefly Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. They have ceded substantial territory to jihadists and do not control swaths of their countries. The deteriorating situation has caused economic hardship in the already underdeveloped countries, along with forced displacement, human rights violations, and increasing violence around population centers. It has also contributed to political instability; each country has experienced military coups at least partially inspired by the perception that the government cannot provide security. As jihadists take control of key roads, capitals are now under threat of attack and siege. If the insurgencies continue gaining strength at their current rate, they will be positioned to force the government out of population centers. This would render these countries collapsed states and allow jihadist groups to establish an Islamist state. Thus, the insurgencies encompass the key sectors of Sahelian countries: security, governance, and development.

The insurgencies also pose an increasing transnational threat, particularly to countries in West Africa. Jihadist groups are not just interested in the Sahel; JNIM has expanded its activity to Benin, Togo, and Côte D'Ivoire. JNIM and ISSP have recruited militants from these countries, as well as Ghana, Mauritania, and Senegal, by appealing to ethnic groups like the Fulani. Jihadist groups spread the message that they protect marginalized groups through targeted media campaigns beyond the Sahel. Because other West African countries share challenges with their Sahelian neighbors—ethnic tensions, ineffective governance, underdevelopment—jihadist groups might be able to

export their insurgencies if they continue to grow stronger in the Sahel. They have stated their intention to do so and will likely take advantage of any openings.

In addition, Europe, the United States, and the international community are at risk. Terrorist attacks outside of the Sahel can benefit al-Qaeda and ISIS, to which JNIM and ISSP have allegiance despite their local focus. These Sahelian jihadist groups have threatened terrorist attacks on Western countries in the past and want to eliminate Western influence from West Africa, where attacks against Western assets and personnel have already been conducted. As jihadist groups control more territory, they have more resources at their disposal. This allows them to enhance their training, logistical capacity, and ability to conduct external attacks. Foreign militants have been traveling to the Sahel to train and fight with jihadist groups, especially ISSP. This is consistent with other Islamic State provinces like ISIS-Khorasan that have used their territory to train foreign militants to conduct external attacks. Because many foreign militants in the Sahel are from countries with established migration and smuggling routes to Europe, this is a clear threat. Moreover, the inability of the United States to control its southern border has attracted migrants from West Africa. Jihadists are involved in migration and smuggling routes, which increases the risk of militants infiltrating the United States. In conclusion, escalating jihadist insurgencies threaten to take control of Sahelian countries and destabilize West Africa. Their success only benefits worldwide al-Qaeda and Islamic State fundraising, recruitment, and operations.

Counterterrorism Strategies

To address the insurgencies, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger have employed a strategy of counterterrorism. Of the three counterterrorism strategies a government can pursue—repression, decapitation, and persuasion—they have tried each simultaneously. However, they have relied on repression and decapitation, employing security forces to clear areas and kill and capture terrorists, especially the leaders. They have inconsistently employed persuasion, which can involve negotiations to reduce violence or to demobilize and splinter groups. It can also consist of policy measures to address drivers of terrorist activity, including lack of economic opportunity. One reason Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger have failed to stop jihadists is because their counterterrorism strategy is unaligned with the reality of the

insurgencies. It is not only a war of killing and capturing jihadists; it is a war of securing the population and providing effective governance to address the drivers of the insurgencies.

Counterterrorism in Mali

Mali has largely relied on the same approach since the proto-caliphate in northern Mali was overthrown in 2014, despite the consolidation and escalation of the insurgencies. From 2013 to 2014, Malian and French security forces waged conventional warfare to regain control of population centers. Jihadists had established a government but failed to defend it against Malian and French conventional weapons and tactics. They scattered to ungoverned spaces, especially in cross-border areas, from which they employed a strategy of terrorism for multiple years. In collaboration with Mali and other Sahelian countries, France rolled out Operation Barkhane in 2014 to hunt remnants of jihadist groups. Therefore, Mali pursued a strategy of repression and decapitation. Malian and French security forces, which combined to number 35,000–40,000 members, conducted raids and gathered intelligence to target jihadist leaders. Their aim was to disrupt jihadist groups with kill or capture operations so they could not reconstitute. The United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), which consisted of 15,000 troops from a variety of African, Asian, and European countries, patrolled major roads and population centers to secure areas. The G5 Sahel Joint Force was formed between Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Chad, and Mauritania in 2014 to conduct operations in cross-border areas.

The counterterrorism strategy achieved tactical successes such as the killing of some senior leaders, but it did not prevent the reconstitution of jihadist groups. By 2016, they had transitioned from ungoverned spaces to more densely populated areas to launch insurgencies. Mali did not respond by overhauling its counterterrorism strategy or waging counterinsurgency. It doubled down on repression by allowing self-interested militias to conduct unsupervised operations against suspected jihadists, leading to ethnic reprisals. Excluding hostage release talks, Mali did not take any steps to negotiate with jihadist groups beyond declaring its openness to dialogue. In fact, it excluded them from the 2015 Algiers Accords, which ended the civil war. The insurgencies continued intensifying, as attacks and deaths of civilians and security forces rose sharply.

Eventually, the military's dissatisfaction over the escalating insurgencies combined with governance shortcomings to spur military coups in 2020 and 2021. However, the ruling junta's policy changes have been reducing international support and intensifying repression. It removed Operation Barkhane and MINUSMA forces and pulled out of the G5 Sahel. The junta has repositioned units to the capital to consolidate its authority. What it lacks in manpower, it tries to make up for in coercion. The junta has significantly increased indiscriminate targeting during counterterrorism operations, negatively affecting civilians. The junta's acceptance of a Wagner Group contingent has compounded this trend. The contingent of one thousand mercenaries conducts counterterrorism operations alongside Malian security forces. Four out of five people killed in Wagner operations have been civilians. This includes a March 2022 massacre in which Wagner and Malian security forces killed over five hundred civilians in central Mali. In 2022, Wagner and Malian security forces were responsible for 40 percent of violent civilian deaths. Intensified repression has coincided with strengthening insurgencies.

Mali's approach has failed because it is a counterterrorism strategy rather than a counterinsurgency one. Counterterrorism operations may subdue high-value targets or clear areas temporarily, but Malian and partner security forces have not held areas or prevented jihadist groups from regrouping. Consequently, jihadists have regrouped in ungoverned spaces after being pushed out of population centers. This is due to both manpower restraints over a vast geographic area and ineffective strategy. Counterterrorism operations are not coupled with efforts to establish effective governance, especially in rural areas. The same factors that contributed to the outbreak of the Malian civil war—ethnic marginalization and lack of basic services—remain unaddressed. Security force abuses have reinforced civilians' belief that the government cannot protect its population. Jihadist groups have thereby sustained their insurgencies among a population distrustful of the government and susceptible to jihadist recruitment.

Counterterrorism in Burkina Faso

In response to the insurgencies, Burkina Faso has escalated its approach, although it still does not reflect a strategy of counterinsurgency. Unlike in Mali, insurgencies in Burkina Faso did not become an urgent security threat until 2018. This coincided with JNIM's consolidation and ISSP's emergence. Up to that point, Burkina Faso relied on Operation Barkhane forces, the G5 Sahel Joint Force, and U.S.

military aid to decapitate jihadist groups and undertake limited repression through raids. Its security forces were small, consisting of roughly ten thousand members. As jihadists began infiltrating northern Burkina Faso from central Mali, Burkinabé security forces increased their presence in the affected provinces.

By the end of 2019, though, deaths due to the insurgencies had increased over 700 percent from the previous year. Burkina Faso responded by forming a militia called Volunteers for the Defense of the Homeland (*Volontaires pour la défense de la patrie*, or VDP). The VDP is supposed to train and arm civilians of all ethnicities to defend their localities alongside traditional security forces. They are used for more than defense, however, also conducting offensive operations like raids. While the VDP is supposed to be inclusive, it has systematically excluded Fulani due to paranoia about their potential ties to jihadists. The VDP's formation is representative of a shift toward widespread repression, as it mobilized the entire country to fight jihadists. Burkina Faso did allow localities to pursue short-term ceasefires with jihadist groups in 2020–21, which contributed to short-term reductions in violence. However, authorities did not renew these ceasefires, and the insurgencies have substantially worsened since.

The deteriorating security situation added to preexisting dissatisfaction over government corruption and ineffectiveness to cause two military coups in 2022. The ruling junta has responded similarly to Mali's, reducing international support and intensifying repression. It removed Operation Barkhane forces and pulled out of the G5 Sahel in 2023. To consolidate its authority, the junta repositioned units from northern and eastern regions that were fighting jihadists to the capital. To address the manpower deficit, the junta has relied more on the VDP and drones. The VDP has increased its ranks by roughly 50,000 militiamen, who collect intelligence and conduct raids and ambushes. The junta purchased drones from Turkey in 2022 and used them to attack suspected jihadists in areas inaccessible to security forces. Along with indiscriminate targeting during counterterrorism operations, these factors have caused a substantial number of civilian deaths. Symbolic of the junta's intensified repression, an Africa Corps contingent of one hundred mercenaries representing the rebranded Wagner Group arrived in January 2024. While intensified repression has achieved limited tactical successes in killing and capturing jihadists and defending some localities, the insurgencies continue to escalate.

Burkina Faso's approach has failed because it has prioritized counterterrorism operations over addressing the drivers of the insurgencies. The insurgencies are not happening because Burkina Faso is failing to kill and capture enough jihadists; they spilled over from Mali due to the marginalization of ethnic groups like the Fulani and a lack of governance. Vulnerable civilians view jihadist groups as protectors who provide justice and services. Security force abuses and an anemic government presence in the tri-border area with Mali and Niger further this perception. While the junta has incorporated limited counterinsurgency by tasking the VDP with helping to hold areas, a lack of oversight and resources hampers the efforts. Consequently, they are not enough to close security and governance gaps that jihadists exploit. The short-term benefits of drone strikes and other counterterrorism operations will not make up for the governance deficit in the long term.

Counterterrorism in Niger

Niger is an outlier when compared to Mali and Burkina Faso, as it used a multi-faceted counterterrorism approach with some counterinsurgency methods to contain the insurgencies. Only after a military coup caused more by infighting than insecurity did Niger's approach mirror Mali's and Burkina Faso's. This has coincided with worsening insurgencies. Until the fall of 2023, the insurgencies in Niger were at a relatively steady state. While there was a notable amount of jihadist activity in the tri-border area with Mali and Burkina Faso, it was mostly contained. Niger had employed a strategy of decapitation and limited repression. Niger benefitted from France's reallocation of troops after their removal from Mali and Burkina Faso. Alongside the G5 Sahel Joint Force and several thousand Operation Barkhane and U.S. troops, Niger used its roughly 35,000 to 40,000 security force members to target jihadist leaders and conduct disciplined raids. Niger's robust security force presence prevented the insurgencies from expanding beyond its tri-border regions. When combined with persuasion, this strategy helped Niger temporarily avoid the significant escalation experienced by Mali and Burkina Faso.

The biggest difference between Niger and the other two countries was its use of persuasion to reduce violence and demobilize jihadists. When former President Mohamed Bazoum took office in 2021, he facilitated negotiations with jihadist groups. His administration conducted local outreach to identify what jihadists want as well as their vulnerabilities. Bazoum proved his credibility by releasing reformed jihadist leaders from prison and meeting with them to address their concerns. This

counterinsurgency method was included in the government's broader counterterrorism strategy, as it tried to be more accountable and responsive. The most substantive dialogue was geared toward jihadists' demobilization. Rather than punish former jihadists, the government set up facilities to deradicalize them. After completing this process, they were given employment resources to assist with their reintegration into society. Bazoum also appointed a peace minister to settle the ethnic tensions that jihadists often exploit to recruit. As a result, the Fulani and Zarma ethnic groups signed a local peace agreement in western Niger. Niger's approach of targeted counterterrorism operations and negotiations paid dividends, as jihadist activity in the first half of 2023 reached its lowest levels since 2018.

Despite a positive security outlook, the population and security forces had dealt with jihadist activity for several years by July 2023. While political infighting was the primary cause of that month's military coup, dissatisfaction with the government's inability to completely stop the insurgencies helped justify it. The ruling junta has used this dissatisfaction to change its strategy using the same playbook as Mali and Burkina Faso: reduced international support, intensified repression, and stalled negotiations with jihadist groups. It removed Operation Barkhane and U.S. forces and pulled out of the G5 Sahel. It repositioned units combatting jihadists to the capital to consolidate its authority. Negotiations have been set aside in favor of counterterrorism operations with indiscriminate targeting, negatively affecting civilians. The junta has increased its use of airstrikes, which has resulted in civilian deaths on multiple occasions. Militias outlawed by former President Bazoum due to ethnic reprisals are now operating without oversight. In another sign of intensifying repression, a Wagner Africa Corps contingent of one hundred mercenaries arrived in April 2024. In a stark contrast to the pre-coup security situation, JNIM and ISSP have exponentially increased their activity and gained territory near the capital.

Niger's pre-coup approach was a limited success, while its post-coup approach is a failure. Its pre-coup approach recognized the drivers of the insurgencies. Its robust security force presence in Western regions limited the ungoverned spaces jihadists could exploit. Along with pursuing official dialogue to reduce ethnic tensions, this provided security for the population. In addition, Niger created a framework to demobilize and deradicalize jihadists. Its steps toward accountable, responsive governance disrupted jihadist activity and recruitment. However, long-standing shortcomings in infrastructure and other services left the population disillusioned, which helps explain the

military coup. Its post-coup approach has ignored and, in some cases, worsened the drivers of the insurgencies. Niger has prioritized undisciplined counterterrorism operations over a robust security force presence, reduction of ethnic tensions, and demobilization of jihadists. This has given jihadist groups an opening to recruit from a marginalized and underserved population and gain territory.

Policy Recommendations

If Sahelian governments are to weaken jihadist insurgencies, they must revise their strategy to reflect counterinsurgency methods. Their policy objectives should not be jihadist-centric, such as killing and capturing as many jihadists as possible. Rather, their objectives should be population-centric, focused on securing localities and improving governance. That their populations perceive jihadist groups as, in some cases, providing better security and governance shows the extent of their shortcomings. The population must be convinced that the government can protect them and serve their interests. If this happens, localities will be resilient to jihadist incursions and recruitment.

Recommendation #1. Prioritize clearing and holding operations over raids and high-value targets.

To secure the population, Sahelian governments must enhance their security force presence to limit ungoverned spaces and jihadist territorial control. Under the current counterterrorism strategies of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, the emphasis is on targeting jihadist leaders and clearing areas with raids. Because jihadist groups have adopted a strategy of insurgency rather than terrorism, these operations are insufficient. Security forces are moving from one operation to the next, allowing jihadists to regroup and return to areas that were recently cleared. The only way to prevent this is by holding territory with a consistent security force presence, reflecting a strategy of counterinsurgency. This can be accomplished through security force augmentation. Whether it is military, law enforcement, or, if necessary, militias, security forces need more people to secure ungoverned spaces, especially the tri-border area.

In 2023, Mali and Burkina Faso spent approximately 4 percent of their gross domestic product on military expenditures, while Niger spent approximately 2 percent. For countries that are unsuccessfully fighting for their survival, this is not enough. They should maximize their military expenditures, prioritizing personnel and training over conventional weaponry like artillery and aircraft. This type of weaponry is not as

useful for combatting insurgencies, and only trained personnel can hold territory. Sahelian countries have long struggled with inexperienced and unmotivated security forces, making it vital to properly pay and train them.

If increased expenditures and prioritization do not field enough security force members, governments should employ militias. Militias are more cost-effective than traditional security forces because their members are not full-time security professionals. However, militias come with the risks of ineffectiveness and abuses against civilians. Because jihadist groups exploit ethnic tensions and abuses against civilians to recruit, militias must be inclusive and unbiased. Therefore, they should be integrated into the government's security forces, similar to the VDP in Burkina Faso but with more oversight. Integration will allow governments to provide training, arms, and oversight. At least one military officer should be deployed to oversee each localities' militiamen. Given their controversial track record with offensive operations, militias must be employed exclusively for defensive purposes. They can collect intelligence and share it with traditional security forces, who will then act on it. To deny jihadists territory, governments must shift from prioritizing counterterrorism operations to counterinsurgency ones. If jihadist groups cannot control territory or thrive in ungoverned spaces, they will no longer be able to wage insurgencies.

Recommendation #2. Expand cooperation with international partners.

Another way Sahelian governments should augment their security forces is with international partnerships. Because vast swaths of territory need to be cleared and held, the more security forces, the better. The best bet for partnerships is between the Sahelian countries themselves. The newly formed Association of Sahelian States—consisting of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger—should stand up a joint military force. It can be used to stabilize the problematic tri-border area shared by the three countries. By pooling their resources, they can make up for their individual shortcomings. They should also attempt to convince Chad and Mauritania to join, as all these countries worked together on counterterrorism in the G5 Sahel. Chad and Mauritania have been more effective than Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger in securing their borders and conducting anti-jihadist operations.

If possible, Sahelian countries should partner with the United Nations and Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). While a United Nations partnership is unlikely given Mali's removal of

MINUSMA, a decision Burkina Faso and Niger approved of, it would add needed manpower. The same goes for ECOWAS given Sahelian countries' withdrawal from the regional bloc. However, ECOWAS has recently conducted outreach to convince them to rejoin. They should respond favorably and prioritize rejoining because the insurgencies threaten ECOWAS member countries as well. This might make the bloc more likely to provide security assistance. In addition, Sahelian countries should seek partnerships with Western countries, which have vast financial and logistical capabilities as well as experience in the Sahel and Afghanistan. Western countries are also concerned about the threat jihadists pose to their interests and homelands. However, the complicating factor is that each Sahelian country has already terminated partnerships with some Western countries. Therefore, international partnerships between the Sahelian countries should be prioritized to increase their capacity to hold territory and secure their populations.

Recommendation #3. Enhance governance, particularly in rural areas.

Once localities are more secure, Sahelian governments must increase their presence, especially in rural areas vulnerable to jihadist incursions. The insurgencies exploit governance gaps to appeal to marginalized ethnic groups and underserved populations. Governments must challenge the narrative that jihadist groups provide more effective governance in these communities. This involves bolstering local services and the justice system. Governments should co-opt local leaders as liaisons between localities and the government. Liaisons will engage with the population to evaluate needs and report back to the government. Governments will complement liaisons' efforts by establishing multiple outposts in each of their regions. These outposts will be manned by government representatives, who will use information from liaisons to satisfy local needs. Liaisons should also ensure the justice system is arbitrating disputes, particularly ethnic tensions. This initiative is cost-effective because it co-opts local leaders without sending representatives to every locality. It replaces marginalization with representation, improving the population's perception of the government. The population will be less likely to tolerate, let alone join, jihadist groups if it believes the government treats them fairly and serves their needs.

Recommendation #4. Pursue negotiations to demobilize jihadists and ease ethnic tensions.

Improving security and governance will address the drivers of the insurgencies, opening an opportunity for negotiation. Using Niger's former approach, Sahelian governments should open an official office within a ministry that handles negotiations, ethnic disputes, and demobilization. Government sponsorship increases the legitimacy of dialogue. Negotiations should not cede territory to jihadists; they want to replace the current state with an Islamist one, and territorial control furthers that cause. However, negotiations should offer amnesty to jihadists willing to go through a disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration process. This process requires that demobilization facilities complete with employment assistance be established in each region. Governments should seek funding and assistance from the United Nations, which has an office dedicated to disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration. In addition, governments should facilitate dialogue between feuding ethnic groups, using civil society and religious leaders as mediators. By reducing ethnic tensions, governments will deprive jihadists of a key recruitment tool. Moreover, sponsoring negotiations for the purpose of demobilization will deprive jihadist groups of the members they need to wage insurgencies.

Recommendation #5. Stop paying to release hostages.

Sahelian governments should make the difficult decision to stop ransom payments because they are a primary source of funding for jihadist groups. Payments help fund their insurgencies in the present and incentivize future kidnappings. Not only should governments not partake in ransom payments, but they also should implement laws preventing private citizens from doing so. If foreigners try to make payments, Sahelian governments should protest through diplomatic channels. They can justify this policy by pointing to the severity of the security situation and the transnational threat it poses. Governments have direct control over a key source of funding for destabilizing insurgencies, so they should immediately cut it.

Conclusion

Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger must align their security strategy with their security situation. The situation is deteriorating, as jihadist insurgencies claim more land and encircle population centers. Meanwhile, the governments are pursuing tactical counterterrorism

victories using means incompatible with strategic counterinsurgency victory. The only way they can prevail is by addressing the drivers of the insurgencies. The population needs security and governance, both of which are currently absent. Therefore, governments must be more present, accountable, and responsive to win the trust of the population. Only security and governance will prevent jihadists from controlling territory, thereby restoring stability in Sahel and reducing the transnational threat. If Sahelian countries fail to do so, the insurgencies will likely pose progressively larger threats in the Sahel, West Africa, and the international community, particularly Western countries.

Image Credit: Frederic Petry / Hans Lucas vis REUTERS

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