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Combatting violent extremism in the Sahel region

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Introduction

The Sahel region remains one of the most affected areas by violent extremism globally. It stretches from Senegal to Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Chad, Sudan, and Eritrea, and violence is perpetrated in this area by groups such as JNIM, ISGS, AQIM and Boko Haram.

Over the past two decades, violent extremism has rapidly developed into one of the most difficult challenges facing the Sahel region, with so many extremist groups having been created and expanding their influence and extremist groups finding more grievances to exploit, their influence is beginning to extend beyond the Sahel. This has led to a humanitarian crisis and political instability across the whole region, and as the influence of these terrorist groups spreads, it will only worsen.

Definition of Key Terms

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

Maslow's pyramid is a hierarchation of needs from the most fundamental to the almost superfluous needs. We can use this as a tool to understand the techniques of recruitment of extremist groups and what drives their violent actions. They have been categorized into psychological and physiological needs and will be linked back to further in this report.



Maslow's hierarchy of needs

Figure 1: *Maslow's hierarchy of needs*. (November 20, 2023). Imgur. <https://imgur.com/YTJX4vd>

Fragile state index (FSI)

The FSI evaluates 12 key social, economic, political, and security indicators to quantify a state's fragility; they collectively reflect a country's ability to maintain peace, provide services, and govern effectively. Each indicator provides a maximum of 10 points to the overall score; a higher score indicates a greater fragility.

Violent extremism

The UN does not have a formal definition of violent extremism. However, it is often described as follows: "The beliefs and actions of people who support or use violence to achieve ideological, religious, or political goals."

Internally displaced people (IDP)

The UN definition of IDPs is "persons or groups of persons who have been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence, in particular as a result of or to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalized violence, violations of human rights or natural or human-made disasters, and who have not crossed an internationally recognized border."

General Overview

Causes of violent extremism

Mali is one of the countries with the most acute situation of violent extremism. This can be explained using the Fragile State Index (FSI). Firstly, figure 2 shows that Mali has a corruption score of 97.3, which is quite high compared to countries such as the Netherlands at 19.5. Furthermore, when considering the graph of the past two decades of FSI scores, it is evident that the increase in the score (the increased fragility of the state) coincides with the establishment and rise of terrorist groups within Mali.

Mali

MLI

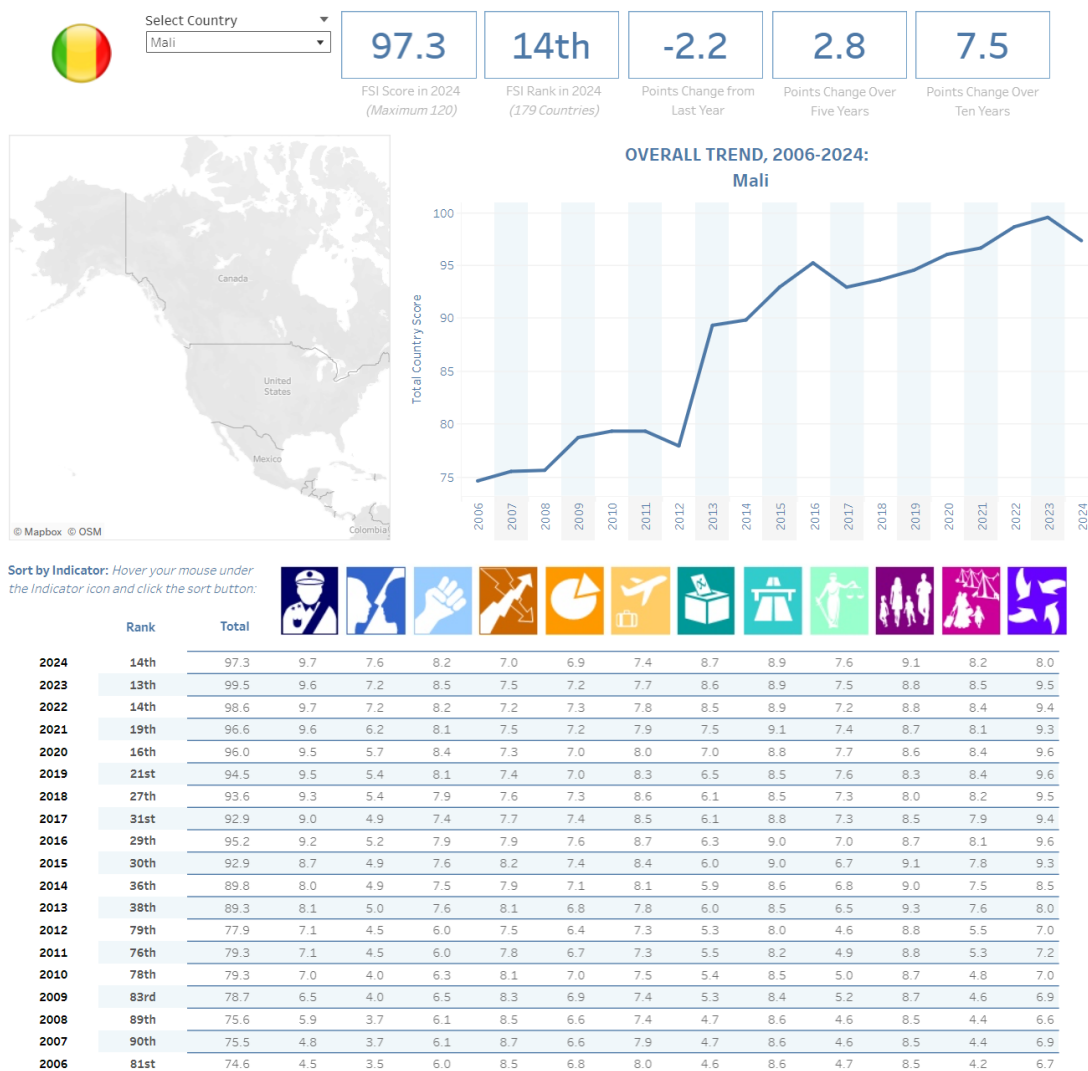


Figure 2: FSI score Mali. (2024). Fragile State Index. <https://fragilestatesindex.org/country-data/>

Dissecting the individual indicators, some indicators can be linked back to Maslow's Pyramid. For example, the security apparatus score sits at 9.7 (close to 10 - the lowest score possible), which quantifies the militarisation and abuse, fragmentation, loyalty issues, and external dependence of Mali for security. Furthermore, human rights violations have resulted from the military's extensive involvement in domestic security. There have been several claims of violence against civilians by security forces, extrajudicial executions, and torture. Mali's security forces are also very fragmented, and this impedes their efforts to present a unified front against insurgencies and organized crime. The military also receives international funding, which raises concerns about Mali's long-term ability to provide for its own security needs. The inadequacy of the security apparatus indicates a lack of the basic need for personal security (Figure 1). Furthermore, physiological needs are the most fundamental human needs, and yet these scores exemplify how they have not been satisfied: economic inequality (8.2), lack of public services (8.9), and human rights violations (7.9) can antagonize a population.

The state legitimacy (8.7) and the group grievance (8.2) indicators succinctly summarise all the other indicators because they essentially show the dissatisfaction of the people with the state. This is where the issue comes in. The lack of competency of a government to rule can create power vacuums, one that, with the right timing and methods, extremist groups can jump into with ease. For Mali, these were groups such as Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM), Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), and Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). These groups will magnify grievances to fuel anger in young people, using this as a tool to recruit them.

Mali's FSI breakdown is extremely similar to the other countries in the Sahel region, even in its components. Overall, it is also evident in the heatmap of the 2024 FSI scores (figure 3) that the Sahel region stands out with a darker red than the rest of the world. This is concurrent with the higher levels of violent extremism in this particular region.

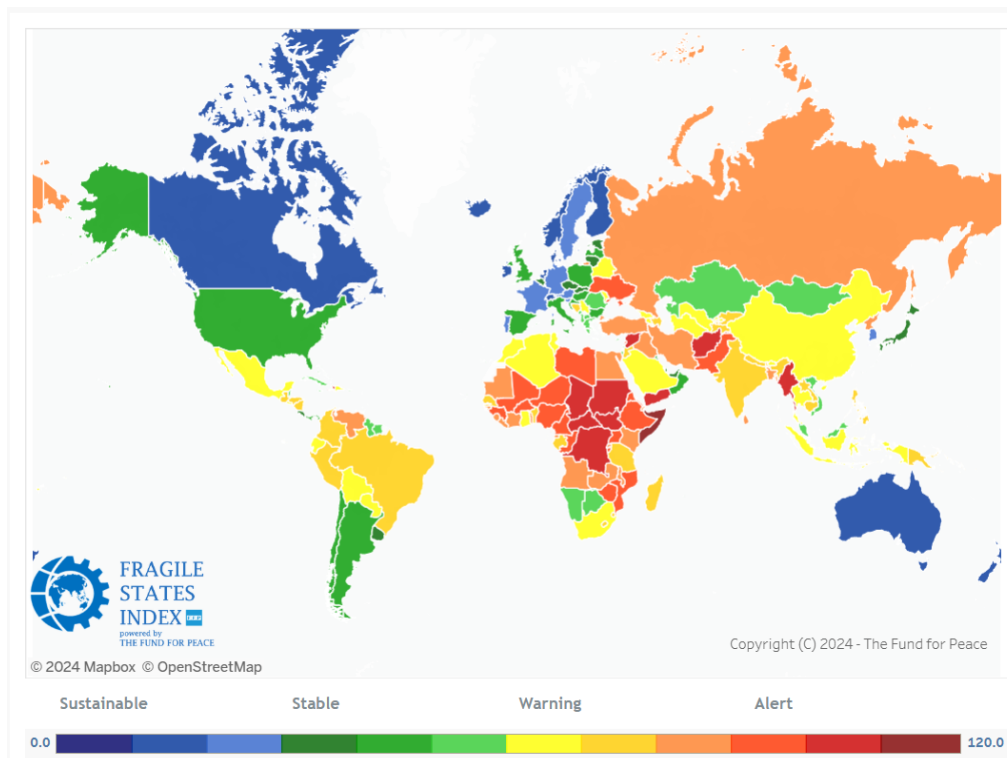


Figure 3: *FSI heatmap*. (2024). Fragile State Index. <https://fragilestatesindex.org/analytics/fsi-heatmap/>

To conclude, the causes for the rise and unceasing violence of extremist groups can be traced back to the lack of competency of some of the Sahel governments to fulfill their population's needs, lending the groups legitimacy and the groups' use of these inadequacies to amplify anger in the population.

Impact on the region

Violent attacks in the region have had numerous detrimental political, economic, and social (including psychological) effects. The region has seen a 2,860% rise in terrorism-related deaths over the past 15 years, accounting for 47% of global terrorism deaths in 2023. According to the UN, over 4.2 million people have been displaced across the Sahel region by the end of 2023; this includes approximately 3.7 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) and over 500,000 refugees and asylum seekers who have fled to neighboring countries like Mauritania and Chad. These IDPs are often forced into overcrowded camps or urban slums, leaving them with a lower quality of life.

Violent extremism has not only caused many civilians and military personnel to end up in hospitals or die but has also led to devastating psychological effects. It has resulted in trauma and

anxiety among survivors and displaced populations; many children will grow up with PTSD, struggling with it for the rest of their lives.

Needless to say, the humanitarian situation in these countries has worsened due to the violence. In 2024, around 17 million people across the Central Sahel countries of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger need humanitarian assistance and protection due to violent extremism (that makes up one-fifth of the region's population). This is in large part due to violent extremism.

Education has also been impacted as a result of some of the actions of violent groups. Schools are frequent targets of attacks, particularly by groups opposing Western-style education, such as Boko Haram. This has led to a significant decline in school attendance, especially for girls, and a generation deprived of education. As is evident, this cuts off the prospects for children and can lead to further social and economic disparities. This only perpetuates grievances among the population, which extremist groups can utilize for recruitment.

Looking at the effects of violent extremism, the consequences of the violence only exacerbate grievances, creating a perpetual cycle of violent extremism and population disillusionment. The violence causes devastating outcomes socially and economically, increasing group grievance and diminishing legitimacy, which in turn drives the expansion and violence of extremist groups.

Previous attempts to solve the issue

Operation Barkhane

Operation Barkhane was the French military counterinsurgency operation against Islamist groups in the Sahel region. It followed the success of Operation Serval, launched in 2013 by France to support Mali against insurgent forces (primarily Islamist militants, who had taken control of the north of the country). Although Operation Serval did take back a lot of territory, most of those extremist groups that were established in Sahel started working across borders; hence, there needed to be a more holistic approach.

They aimed to neutralize the extremist groups, secure borders, prevent the spread of the groups, and strengthen state authority in fragile areas. It intended to prevent the region from becoming a haven for Islamist terrorist groups that plan to attack France and Europe. The main

objective of the French military intervention was the direct support of the G5 Sahel forces through training and the introduction of new technologies and resources.

5000 French troops were operating in several key bases, for example, in Chad (N'Djamena), Mali (Gao and Timbuktu), and Niger (Niamey). These had several purposes: they were used for surveillance with drones, satellites, and on-ground reconnaissance to monitor jihadist movements and identify potential threats, and they allowed troops to be deployed rapidly to areas experiencing spikes in jihadist activity. For instance, when a town or region reported increased attacks, French troops could respond quickly to contain threats and stabilize the situation. The troops also trained, equipped, and supported the G5 Sahel forces to create independence in counterterrorism attacks. They also patrolled areas critical to regional stability, including major roads, border crossings, and resource-rich zones.

Within Operation Barkhane, several air-ground operations combining airstrikes, ground assaults, and reconnaissance missions were carried out to dismantle terrorist camps, supply routes, and leadership structures. Airstrikes targeted specific assets, locations, and individuals (in particular leadership figures) to weaken terrorist organizations and their ability to carry out attacks. They successfully neutralized leaders from AQIM, ISGS, and Ansar Dine. For example, in June 2020, French forces killed Abdelmalek Droukdel, the leader of AQIM, in northern Mali. The Airstrikes also targeted militant camps, hideouts, and logistical hubs. This disrupted jihadist planning, recruitment, and training activities. They also aimed to disrupt jihadist financing and logistics by targeting smuggling routes, arms caches, and convoys transporting weapons and supplies across borders.

However, some strikes and ground assaults caused collateral damage, such as civilian casualties and loss of homes, fuelling anti-French sentiment among local populations. In addition to this, there were accusations of neo-colonialism and civilian casualties during operations, which eroded local support. The junta accused France of undermining its sovereignty and turned to Russia's Wagner Group for military support. Mali demanded the withdrawal of French forces in 2022.

In addition to local aversion to Operation Barkhane, the task of combatting the extremist groups also proved to be challenging. They often dispersed and were able to adapt their tactics to avoid detection, such as blending with civilian populations or decentralizing their operations. These

extremist groups also have resilient networks, so groups such as AQIM and ISGS would replace killed leaders relatively quickly, ensuring operational continuity.

France announced in 2021 that it would scale back its troop presence and transition to a new counterterrorism model, relying on smaller, more agile forces and supporting regional partners rather than leading large-scale operations. French troops shifted focus to bases in Niger and other willing countries, with fewer than 3,000 troops remaining in the Sahel. France prioritized providing intelligence, air support, and training for local and regional forces over leading operations directly. With Mali leaning toward Russia and Burkina Faso also exploring alternative partnerships, France sought to strengthen ties with Niger and Chad as key allies.

G5 Sahel Joint Force

The G5 Sahel Joint Force was a regional security initiative officially launched in 2017, like Operation Barkhane, to address extremist violence, as well as other issues such as cross-border organized crime and human trafficking, which extremist groups are often connected to. They also supported regional development initiatives. What set the group apart from some of the other attempts to eradicate extremist violence, such as Operation Serval, was that it was internally initiated and much less externally driven.

The Force comprised 5,000 troops with soldiers from the G5 countries: Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, and Mauritania. Some troops were assigned to secure borders to block militants from exploiting poorly governed border areas to move, smuggle, and recruit. Others secured key infrastructure, such as roads, markets, and water points, and thereby also protected civilians. Their operations were supported by France's Operation Barkhane, the United Nations' MINUSMA, and U.S. intelligence and logistics resources.

The G5 was dissolved in 2023 as violence escalated, political instability in the constituent countries worsened, and coordination difficulties and resource constraints. Violence began to escalate when Jihadist groups adapted their tactics, leading to continued attacks on both security forces and civilians. There were also multiple coup d'états in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, which led to disagreements between the countries and internal political unrest which increased the challenge of combatting extremist groups. It was difficult to manage cross-border operations among five nations with different military capabilities and priorities proved difficult. The Joint Force was also

underfunded and lacked adequate equipment and logistics for sustained operations. Lastly, some operations resulted in civilian casualties or alleged human rights violations, undermining local trust.

Timeline of Key Events

Here are the dates of some key events. Some of these have already been mentioned in the general overview, and some are other key events that have not been.

Date	Event
January 17, 2012	Tuareg rebellion in Mali (the Azawad uprising); led to the rise of Islamist militant groups in the region.
January 11, 2013	Launch of French-led Operation Serval to combat Islamist militants in northern Mali.
February 16, 2014	Formation of the G5 Sahel Joint Force to combat terrorism and trafficking.
April 14–15 2014	Boko Haram kidnapped 276 students aged from 16 to 18. This will be discussed further in the report.
August 1, 2014	Launch of French-led Operation Barkhane to extend counter-terrorism efforts across the Sahel.
March 2, 2017	Formation of Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM), an al-Qaeda affiliate.
March 17, 2019	An attack on a military base in Dioura, Mali, by JNIM, killed around 23 soldiers.
August 18, 2020	The coup in Mali led to increased instability and militant activity.
August 2021	The killing of Adnan Abu Walid al-Sahrawi, leader of ISIS-Greater Sahara, by French forces.
November 9, 2022	Dissolution of Operation Barkhane.
December 6, 2023	Dissolution of the G5 Sahel Joint Force.

Major Parties Involved

Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin (JNIM)

This group was formed in 2017 and is considered a coalition of different jihadist groups operating in Mali, such as the Macina Liberation Front and Ansar Dine. They have claimed responsibility for several attacks in Niger, Burkina Faso, and Mali. They target foreign forces, government buildings, and military bases using a variety of tactics, including roadside bombs, mortars, landmines, and rockets. JNIM enforces a strict interpretation of Islamic law in territories under their control, where they mandate attendance at sermons; some local practices have been banned, and citizens are taxed by them. Statements and videos have been issued by them as often as not to claim responsibility for attacks and explain their goals. Those show heavy antagonism to the presence of the West, but most especially the French military. Despite their brutality, JNIM attempts to gain local support with the signing of local agreements and supplies in the form of material goods.

Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS)

Known for its brutal tactics and some of the deadliest attacks in the region, ISGS operates mainly along the border areas of Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso. There have been numerous reports of their kidnappings among civilians and military personnel to hold for ransom or use as leverage against governments. Furthermore, they have claimed responsibility for a series of attacks on civilian populations through bombings and shootings aimed at instilling fear and, as such, exerting their control over territories. And like JNIM, ISGS often collaborates with other jihadist factions within the region to enhance their operation capability and increase their influence. By manipulating local grievances regarding governance and economic hardship, or even ethnic tensions, they gain membership and support within disaffected communities.

Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)

Based in northern Mali, AQIM has carried out many attacks on military and civilian targets. AQIM attacks, targeting military forces and civilians, foreign nationals among them, include bombings, ambushes, and kidnappings. AQIM is infamous for its kidnappings of Western nationals in return for large sums of money in ransom. The group is involved in arms and drug trafficking, among other contrabands, across the Sahel and Maghreb. Their propaganda is made to entice fighters by, as with JNIM and ISGS, appealing to local grievances.

Boko Haram

While Boko Haram has its operational base in north-western Nigeria, it has recently started to extend its violent raids to the Sahel regions, particularly in Niger and Chad. The most violent acts that gained international notoriety included the kidnapping of 276 schoolgirls in Chibok in 2014. The girls were subjected to violence and sexual assault, and some were even killed. Since then, the group has been having carried out more mass kidnappings, particularly of women and children, who have at times been used as hostages, forced labor, and child soldiers. Boko Haram is known to deploy suicide bombers - both men and women, as well as children - against civilian targets such as markets, mosques, and schools. At the peak of its activities, Boko Haram was in control of large portions of territory in northeast Nigeria and parts of neighboring countries, where it proclaimed its form of Sharia.

Mali

As previously mentioned, Mali is one of the countries that faces the greatest challenge in combatting terrorist groups such as JNIM, ISGS, and AQIM. The causes are covered in the general overview.

Niger

Niger also faces frequent terrorist attacks, especially in areas bordering Mali and Burkina Faso. They are currently also combatting groups like Boko Haram, ISGS, and JNIM. Violent extremism in Niger is driven by weak governance, high youth unemployment, ethnic tensions, scarce resources, and deep socioeconomic inequalities, particularly in underdeveloped rural areas.

Possible Solutions

Many of the previous attempts to solve the issue have involved a "top-down" approach to tackling violence carried out by extremist groups in the Sahel. This might keep civilians safer in the short term. However, these groups will remain a threat, and new groups or branches might be formed as long as there are grievances. So, a large priority should be addressing the root causes. This might include improving the educational and healthcare systems, improving infrastructure, or developing programs to reduce poverty and create economic opportunities, particularly for youth who may be vulnerable to recruitment by extremist groups.

Similarly, there could also be efforts to foster inclusive governance, ensuring that there is a fair political representation of marginalized communities to reduce grievances that extremist groups

exploit. Furthermore, corruption in government institutions could be addressed to restore legitimacy.

However, these are solutions that will take years to implement. Not to mention, they require a lot of ongoing internal involvement, which will be difficult due to recurrent coups in the region, leaving the governments unstable. In addition to this, as one of the underlying causes of the loss of legitimacy is the large amounts of external intervention, increasing UN involvement in internal security may only exacerbate the issue. Therefore, it is essential that the local governments cooperate and create initiatives like the previous G5 Sahel Joint Force, focusing on sharing intelligence on extremist groups to establish long-term sustainable solutions to the issue. The regional collaboration may also mitigate their influence in the region as their influence can be tracked, and cross-border groups can be found.

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