



Coups d'état and Political Instability in the Western Sahel:

Implications for the Fight against Terrorism and Violent Extremism

Summary

Africa's Western Sahel region faces multiple political, social, economic and security challenges, which are exacerbated by terrorism, violent extremism, communal violence and banditry. While the African Union Commission (AUC) and its partners are working together to address these challenges with innovative approaches, a resurgence of coups d'état has increased the region's fragility and threatened the democratic foundation of affected states. There are growing concerns that terrorist groups could exploit these political uncertainties to entrench their position and expand their activities to other parts of West Africa – and beyond.

Against this backdrop, this policy paper explores how these recent coups d'états and the associated political instability may impact on the fight against terrorism and violent extremism in the Western Sahel. The paper also provides policy options to promote a more robust response to the evolving politico-security situation.

Analysis of the unfolding situation points to a potential leadership crisis in the fight against terrorism and violent extremism.

This is due to various factors, including the demise of the former President of Chad,

Idriss Déby Itno, who was considered a stabilising force in the region. This leadership crisis could further weaken the capacity of states, and military capabilities in particular. Currently, this is weakening momentum and optimism in the fight against terrorism and violent extremism – which is also due to a perceived loss of control in the face of multidimensional challenges. To turn the tide, this policy paper recommends that international and regional pressure on the various military juntas to cede power must be carefully implemented to prevent further suffering among affected populations; as this may increase sympathy for terrorist and violent extremist groups. While returning to democratic rule is important, the international response must be coordinated with determination, caution and discretion. Flexibility, pragmatism and skilled diplomacy are needed to avoid exacerbating the precarious security situation.

Ensuring future stability will require the African Union (AU) to mobilise international support to reshuffle and strengthen the implementation of signed peace agreements, and to enhance the socio-economic resilience of Western Sahel countries. In this way, the root causes of instability can be addressed – including poor governance, corruption, underdevelopment, youth unemployment, political exclusion and marginalisation.

Introduction

Terrorism undermines human security. African countries have been particularly susceptible to the threat of terrorism. This is due to several factors, including weak institutions, porous borders, historical grievances and bad governance. Other drivers include corruption, extreme poverty, absence of rule of law, injustice, impunity of the political elite, and lack of economic opportunities – particularly for young people.¹ At the 455th meeting of the AU Peace and Security

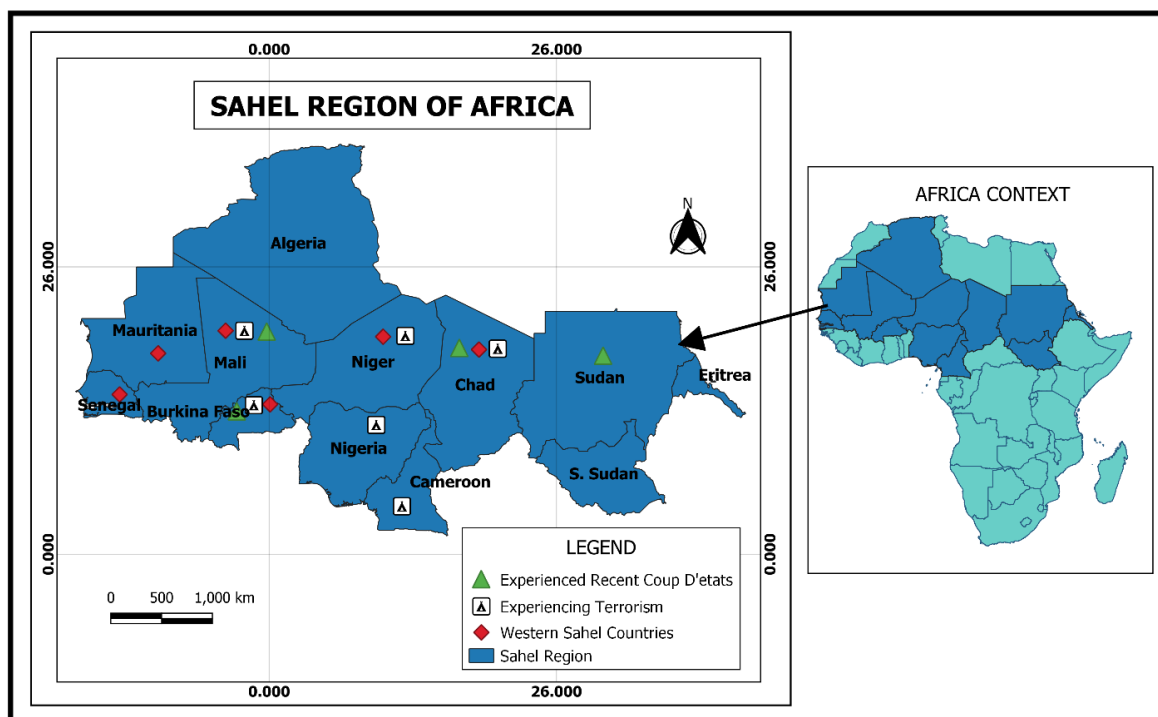
¹ Rizk, J. (2021). Exploring the Nexus between Armed Groups and the Trafficking and Smuggling of Human Beings in the Central Sahel and Libya. *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 1-21.

Council (PSC), several causal factors were identified as conducive to the spread of terrorism and violent extremism in Africa.² These included prolonged and unresolved conflicts, a lack of rule of law, violations of human rights, discrimination, political exclusion, socio-economic marginalisation and poor governance. These factors have acted as catalysts for terrorist and violent extremist organisations to expand their ambitions, capabilities, mobility and geographical reach in Africa, with devastating impact on human security and economic development.³

The Sahel region is confronted with several political, social, economic and security challenges.

These existing challenges are exacerbated by the threat of terrorism and violent extremism. As shown in Map 1, countries in the region

– particularly Niger, Mali, Burkina Faso and Nigeria – have continued to witness terrorist attacks. Data from the African Centre for the Study and Research on Terrorism (ACSRT), reveals that in 2018 and 2019, there was a spike in the number of attacks. In particular, these were perpetrated by Boko Haram and its breakaway faction, the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) in Nigeria and Niger; Jama’ a Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) in Mali and Burkina Faso; and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) in Burkina Faso and Niger.⁴ The ACSRT records further indicate that between January 2019 and December 2021, West Africa recorded the highest number of terrorist attacks in Africa. In this time, the region recorded 2 602 attacks, resulting in 10 899 deaths.⁵ Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Côte d’Ivoire, Togo and Benin were affected by the attacks, with Burkina Faso experiencing a sharp increase in the number of deaths per attack during that period.



Map 1: Western Sahel states that have experienced recent coups d’ état (2019–2022), and/or violent extremism and terrorism

² See for example 455th PSC Reports, <https://www.peaceau.org/en/article/455th-meeting-of-peace-and-security-council-communique-and-report> (Accessed: 16/03/2022).

³ Banunle, A. & Apau, R. (2018). Analysis of Boko Haram Terrorism as an Emerging Security Threat in Western Sahel; Nigeria in Focus. *African Journal on Terrorism*, 7(2), 33-56.

⁴ Apau, R & Ziblim, I. (2019). Beyond Rhetoric: Addressing the Terrorism Situation in the Sahel. African Centre for the Study and Research on Terrorism, Policy brief 001, available at <http://caert.org.dz/Policy-Briefs/POLICY%20BRIEF%20001.pdf> (Accessed: 01/02/2022).

⁵ African Terrorism Database (2022). This information is available at African Union’s African Centre for the Study and Research on Terrorism (ACSRT), based in Algiers, Algeria. Information retrieved on 21/02/2022.

The deteriorating security situation in the Western Sahel has elicited support from the international community. This has resulted in multiple international and regional military deployments. Despite the deployments, terrorist activities have continued. While the AUC and partners are strategizing innovative approaches to contain the scourge, a resurgence of coups d'état across the region has threatened to make an already volatile situation worse.

In August 2020 and May 2021, Mali experienced two coups d'état

carried out by Colonel Assimi Goïta, leading to the overthrow of President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta and Transitional President Bah N'Daw, respectively. In Chad, Mahamat Déby was installed as the transitional president following the death of his father, Idris Déby – in violation of the country's constitution. The most recent coup occurred in Burkina Faso, when Lieutenant Colonel Paul-Henri Damiba organised the overthrow of Roch Marc Christian Kaboré in January 2022. Most of the countries affected by these recent coups are located at the centre in the fight against terrorism and violent extremism as shown on Map 1.

Given the already volatile security situation, there are fears that terrorist groups could exploit the chaotic political scene to entrench their position

and expand to other parts of West Africa, and beyond. What remains under-researched, however, is how unconstitutional changes of government impact on the fight against terrorism and violent extremism in Western Sahel. This paper explores the potential impact

of the recent coups d'état and resulting political instability on the fight against terrorism and violent extremism in the Western Sahel, and offers policy options to promote a more robust response to the evolving situation.

Section Two of the paper explores the coups d'état and political instability in the Western Sahel from a historical perspective. This is followed by an assessment of the evolving threat of terrorism and violent extremism in the Western Sahel in Section Three. Section Four focuses on the international response to the current coups d'état and political instability, while Section Five presents a detailed discussion on the implications of the coups d'état and political instability on the fight against violent extremism and terrorism. Section Five outlines the main conclusions and recommendations on the way forward.

Coups d'état and Political Instability in Western Sahel: Historical Perspectives

Most African countries experienced some form of political instability after gaining independence,

typically characterised by a military takeover of a democratically elected government, or the overthrow of another military regime (counter coups). Table 1 provides a list of successful military coups d'état that occurred in the Western Sahel from 1960 to 2022. The ensuing political instability led to deteriorating security conditions, which severely affected states' overall developmental objectives.⁶ A push for multi-party democracy in the late 1980s and early 1990s led to many countries on the African continent, including in West Africa and the Sahel, to adopt multi-party democratic rule.

⁶ McGowan, P., & Johnson, T. H. (1984). African Military Coups d'État and Underdevelopment: a Quantitative Historical Analysis. *The journal of modern African studies*, 22(4), 633-666.

Table 1: Successful military coups d'état in Western Sahel countries, 1960–2022

Year	Coup Leader	Affected President
Chad		
1975	Noël Milarew Odingar	François Tombalbay
1982	Hissène Habré	Goukouni Oueddei
1990	Itno Idriss Déby	Hissène Habré
2021	Mahamat Idriss Déby	Haroun Kabadi*
Burkina Faso		
1966	Sangoulé Lamizana	Maurice Yaméogo
1980	Saye Zerbo	Sangoulé Lamizana
1982	Jean-Baptiste Ouédraogo	Saye Zerbo
1983	Thomas Sankara	Jean-Baptiste Ouédraogo
1987	Blaise Compaoré	Thomas Sankara
2022	Lt-Col Paul-Henri Damiba	Roch Kaboré
Mali		
1968	Moussa Traoré	Modibo Keita
1991	Amadou Toumani Touré	Moussa Traoré
2012	Amadou Sonogo	Amadou Toumani Touré
2020	Assimi Goïta	Ibrahim Keïta
2021	Assimi Goïta	Bah N'Daw
Mauritania		
1978	Mustafa Ould Salek	Moktar Ould Daddah
1979	Ahmad Ould Bouceif	Mustafa Ould Salek
1980	Mohamed Khouna Ould Haidallah	Mohamed Mahmoud Ould Louly
1984	Maaouya Ould Sid'Ahmed Taya	Mohamed Khouna Ould Haidallah
2005	Ely Ould Mohamed Vall	Maaouya Ould Sid'Ahmed Taya
2008	Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz	Sidi Ould Cheikh Abdallahi
Niger		
1974	Seyni Kountché	Hamani Diori
1996	Ibrahim Baré Maïnassara	Mahamane Ousmane
1999	Daouda Malam Wanke	Ibrahim Baré Mainassara
2010	Salou Djibo	Mamadou Tandja

Source: Author's own

*As President of the National Assembly, he should have been sworn in as the president of Chad until elections were held.

New democratic constitutions had emerged in many states, making unconstitutional takeover of governments treasonable. Regional and international organisations also adopted protocols and resolutions that espoused zero tolerance for unconstitutional changes of government.⁷ The drive to democratise

became part of the conditionalities for Bretton Woods institutions to lend or grant funds to African countries.⁸ This requirement, and citizens' demand to have a say in who governs them, were linked to the conviction that undemocratic regimes often result in chaos, instability and underdevelopment.

⁷ See, for example, The AU's Lomé Declaration of 1999, African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance, ECOWAS Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance, and the Supplementary Act A/SP2/08/11 on Sanctions Against Member States That Fail to Honour Their Obligations to ECOWAS.

⁸ Baylies, C. (1995). Political conditionality and democratization. *Review of African Political Economy* 22.65 (1995): 321-337.

By the mid-1990s, all countries in the Western Sahel – including Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso and Chad – had embraced multi-party democratic rule.

This development was seen as a breath of fresh air that would usher in new stability for the region, and enabling it to tackle the developmental challenges confronting states. During this new era, the internal civil conflicts and interstate wars that had characterised post-colonial African states disappeared in all but a few cases⁹. However, the democratic gains achieved in the 1990s and the early part of the 21st century have waned in recent years. This is due to growing insecurity and discontent over issues such as bad governance, underdevelopment, poverty, corruption, unemployment, terrorism and violent extremism.

In **Mali**, the third Tuareg rebellion in 2012 in the northern part of the country resulted in the overthrow of the democratically elected government of Amadou Toumani Touré. The putschists, led by Captain Amadou Sonogo, accused the Touré government of incompetence in handling the insurgency. They further alleged that the government had not given the army the equipment, ammunition and resources needed to fight the rebel-jihadists coalition. Soon after the overthrow of the government, the security situation in Mali deteriorated significantly as the rebels and terrorists took control of the regional capitals of Kidal, Gao and Timbuktu. Captain Sonogo eventually ceded power to a civilian-led transitional government with a mandate to conduct presidential elections. In August 2013, Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta was declared winner, and was sworn into office in September 2013. Keïta was re-elected for a second term in 2018.

In 2020, public discontent over corruption, the mismanagement of public funds, and failure to contain the terrorism situation began to manifest. Tensions worsened following a disputed legislative election in March 2020. In June, massive protests broke out in Bamako and other parts of the country. Led by the June 5 Movement and Gathering of Patriotic Forces (M5-RFP), the protesters demanded President Keïta's resignation.

Unable to stem the tide, the president was detained by Malian soldiers – led by Colonel Assimi Goïta – in August 2020, and was forced to resign.

Burkina Faso similarly experienced a popular uprising in 2015. The protests, much like the 2020 Mali demonstrations, led to the ouster of former President Blaise Compaoré. By October 2013, Compaoré had ruled Burkina Faso for 27 years. The constitution prevented him from running for president again in the 2015 election. Compaoré had manipulated term limits in the past, and he survived army mutinies and popular protests calling for his resignation in 2011.¹⁰ In October 2014, he planned to change the constitution to allow him to run for office again. The plan succeeded, as his party controlled two-thirds of the legislature. This sparked demonstrations, which soon spread to other parts of the country beyond the capital Ouagadougou. Following the protests, Compaoré was forced to leave office and flee the country.¹¹

Roch Marc Christian Kaboré was elected president in November 2015, and again in November 2020. Frustrations began to grow over the spread of jihadist violence that had emerged in the country in 2016.

⁹ For more information see State of Democracy in sub-Saharan Africa. Democratic progress at Risk. Briefing. European Parliament. [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2021/690647/EPRS_BRI\(2021\)690647_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2021/690647/EPRS_BRI(2021)690647_EN.pdf).

¹⁰ Maggie, D. (2014). "Burkina Faso: Where Democracy Has Always Run on Protests and Coups." Open Democracy. Retrieved March 2, 2015 (<https://web.archive.org/web/20150302052926/https://www.opendemocracy.net/opensecurity/maggie-dwyer/burkina-faso-where-democracy-has-always-run-on-protests-and-coups>) 21/02/2022.

¹¹ Fessy, T. (2014). How Burkina Faso's Blaise Compaore Sparked His Own Downfall. BBC News. Retrieved January 2, 2022 (<https://web.archive.org/web/20150302053814/http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-29858965>).

Attacks linked to Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State were escalating. As in Mali, anger over the deteriorating security situation and the government's inability to stem the jihadist violence was rising both within the security services and among the general population. On 11 January 2022, eight soldiers accused of planning 'a project to destabilise the institutions of the republic' were arrested. On 24 January, members of the army, led by Lieutenant-Colonel Paul-Henri Damiba, detained President Kaboré and seized power. The coup leader criticised the president's strategy for battling Islamist terrorists.¹²

In the case of **Chad**, late President Idriss Déby Itno had held on to power for 30 years until his sudden demise in 2021. Déby's death was attributed to injuries sustained during a visit to troops fighting the Front for Change and Concord in Chad (FACT) rebel movement. During his reign, Déby faced a number of coup attempts and rebellions. This included a foiled attempt in March 2006, led by brothers Tom and Timane Erdimi. The two high-ranking military officers had also tried, unsuccessfully, to overthrow Déby in 2004. According to the constitution, the president of the National Assembly should assume the duties of the head of state on an interim basis until elections are conducted. However, the military swiftly took power and installed President Déby's 37-year-old son and military commander, Mahamat Idriss Déby, as interim president.¹³ The military suspended the constitution, and established the Transitional Military Council to govern the country for 18 months.

In April 2021, Niger witnessed the transfer of power from one democratically elected leader to another for the first time

when former president Mahamadou Issoufou peacefully handed over power to President Mohamed Bazoum after two five-year terms in office. Prior to that, **Niger** had been bedevilled by coups since independence in 1958. The latest attempt to forcefully take power occurred in March 2021, when a military unit attempted to seize the presidential palace in Niamey days before Bazoum was sworn into office.¹⁴ The recurring coups, counter and attempted coups are symptomatic of weaknesses in the Nigerien democratic system, and the necessity to strengthen democratic institutions in the country. Niger, like other countries in Western Sahel, requires a stable and strong government to confront the scourge of terrorism and violent extremism in the Tillabéri and Diffa regions.

Mauritania, like the other countries in the Western Sahel has not been spared coups and political instability. A string of coups began in Mauritania after its independence in 1960. In 1978, Col. Mustafa Ould Salek overthrew the country's first President, Moktar Ould. Coups continued thereafter. Col. Mustafa only stayed in power for a year, before being similarly ousted by Lt. Col. Mohamed Mahmoud Ould Louly, who also barely remained in power for another one year before being overthrown by Col. Mohamed Khouna Ould Haidalla in 1980. The unbroken streak of coups would continue (see **Table 1**). Mauritania's most recent coup took place in 2008, instigated by Gen. Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz and his friend Mohamed Mohamed Ould Ghazouani, ousting the country's first democratically elected civilian president Sidi Ould Cheikh Abdallahi.

¹² Burkina Faso army deposes president in West Africa's latest coup. Reuters. 24/01/22. <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/burkina-faso-president-kaboré-detained-military-camp-sources-tell-reuters-2022-01-24/>.

¹³ Chad's 'covert coup' and the implications for democratic governance in Africa. Retrieved on 21/02/2022 (<https://theconversation.com/chads-covert-coup-and-the-implications-for-democratic-governance-in-africa-159725>)

¹⁴ Niger: Attack on presidential palace an 'attempted coup'. Retrieved on 21/02/2022 (<https://www.dw.com/en/niger-attack-on-presidential-palace-an-attempted-coup/a-57060812>)

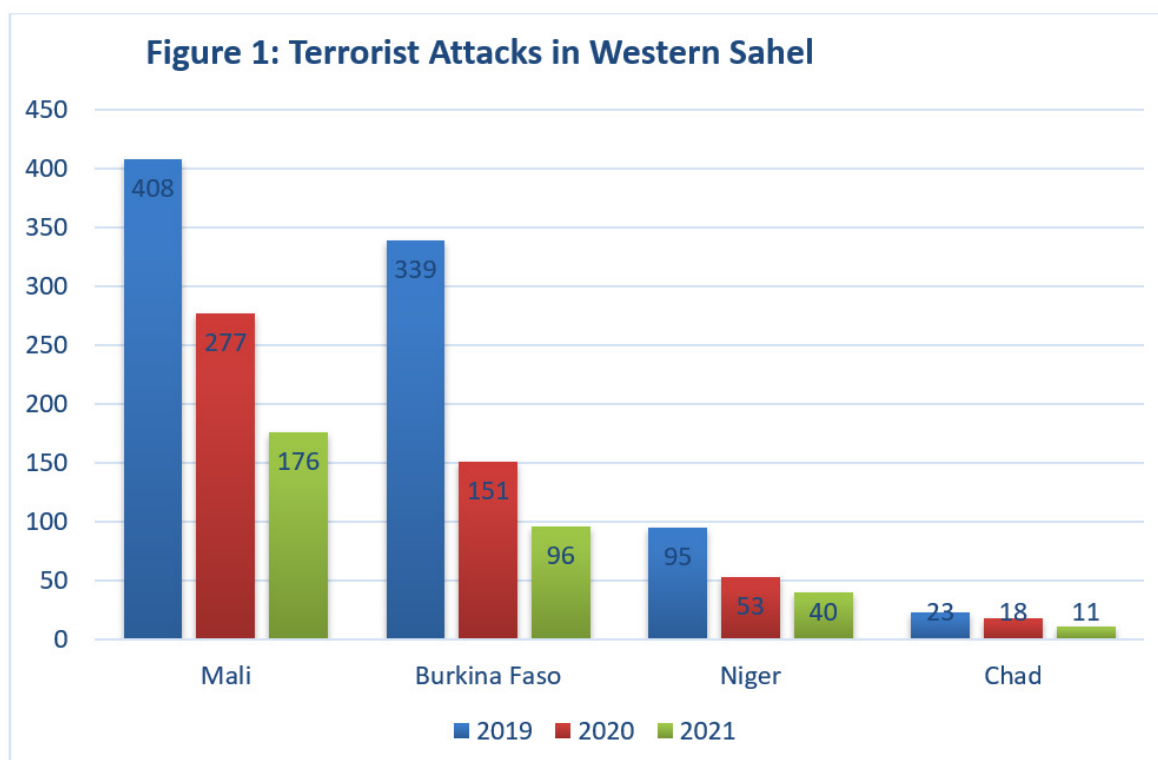
Violent Extremism and Terrorism in Western Sahel: An Evolving Situation

The Sahel region has become home to some of the world’s deadliest terrorist groups in recent years, witnessing numerous atrocities committed against civilians, security forces and government officials. The most active groups in the region are JNIM and ISGS. Tens of thousands of people have lost their lives in attacks perpetrated by these groups, and millions more have been displaced within and across national borders.

In Mali, the return to civilian rule in 2013 did little to improve the deteriorating security situation, as the Salafi-jihadist groups that had virtually hijacked the Tuareg rebellion continued to run riot in the north. In 2015, the Malian government and the Coordination of Azawad Movements, an alliance of rebel groups from the north, signed the Algiers Peace and Reconciliation Agreement. Optimism surrounding the peace deal soon diminished as terrorist groups that had been excluded from the agreement expanded their activities. By the end of 2015, these groups had spread to

central Mali and joined with the newly formed Macina Liberation Front (MLF), led by Amadou Koufa. Terrorist activities in central Mali quickly spilled over into Burkina Faso and Niger. In Burkina Faso, the group Ansarul Islam, led by now-deceased Malam Ibrahim Dicko, also began to perpetrate attacks in the north of the country. By 2017, Western Sahel became the epicentre of terrorist activities on the continent, with Mali bearing the brunt of most of the attacks.

Numerous international military deployments in the region have included the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), Operation Barkhane, and the G-5 Sahel Force. In response to the expansion of these groups, the Al-Qaeda-affiliated groups – comprising Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Al-Mourabitoun, the MLF and Ansaru Dine – announced in March 2017 that they would merge to form JNIM (Jama’ a Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimin). The merger led to an intensification of attacks in northern and central Mali, western Niger, and north and eastern Burkina Faso. Figure 1 shows the number of terrorist attacks per year in Western Sahel countries from 2019 to 2021.

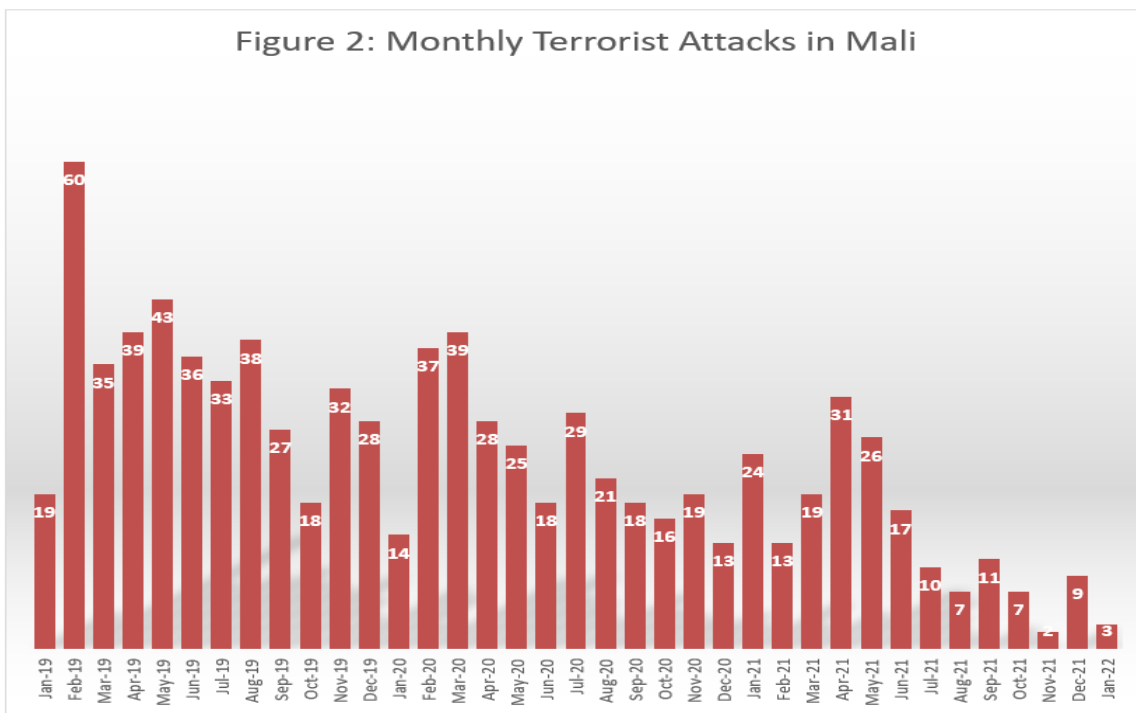


Source: ACSRT Terrorism Database, 2022

Although the 2020 coup leaders in Mali cited growing insecurity as the main reason for their action, the security situation has not witnessed any significant improvement since the military takeover. Admittedly, the number of terrorist attacks has declined in the area governed by the junta, particularly in latter part of 2020 and in 2021 – as shown in Figure 2. However, attacks had begun to decline before the junta took power in August 2020.

While the total number of terrorist attacks in 2019 was 408, 2020 witnessed a 32.1% reduction, with 277 attacks were recorded. Similarly, 2021 saw a further decline in attacks: 176 attacks were recorded, lower than those recorded in 2019 and 2020.¹⁵ The decrease may be attributed to several factors, including the COVID-19 pandemic; the intensification of counter-terrorism operations by Operation Barkhane, the G-5 Sahel Joint Taskforce, and the Malian forces; as well as reported conflict between JNIM and ISGS.

Since the popular uprising that led to the ouster of former President Blaise Compaoré in 2015, Burkina Faso has faced persistent attacks by terrorist groups. This has resulted in numerous deaths and the displacement of an estimated 1.5 million people.¹⁶ Between 2016 and 2019, the number of terrorist attacks increased fivefold, from 69 attacks in 2016 to 339 attacks in 2019.¹⁷ The initial vacuum created by the departure of President Compaoré, and the subsequent disbanding of the elite presidential corps, affected the security coordination in the country. Terrorists exploited this lull to launch attacks, with initial hostilities first occurring in the capital Ouagadougou, and later concentrating in the north. The 15 January 2016 double terrorist attacks on the Splendid Hotel and the Cappuccino restaurant in Ouagadougou, in which 30 people were killed, changed the terrorism landscape in the country.¹⁸



Source: ACSRT Terrorism Database, 2022

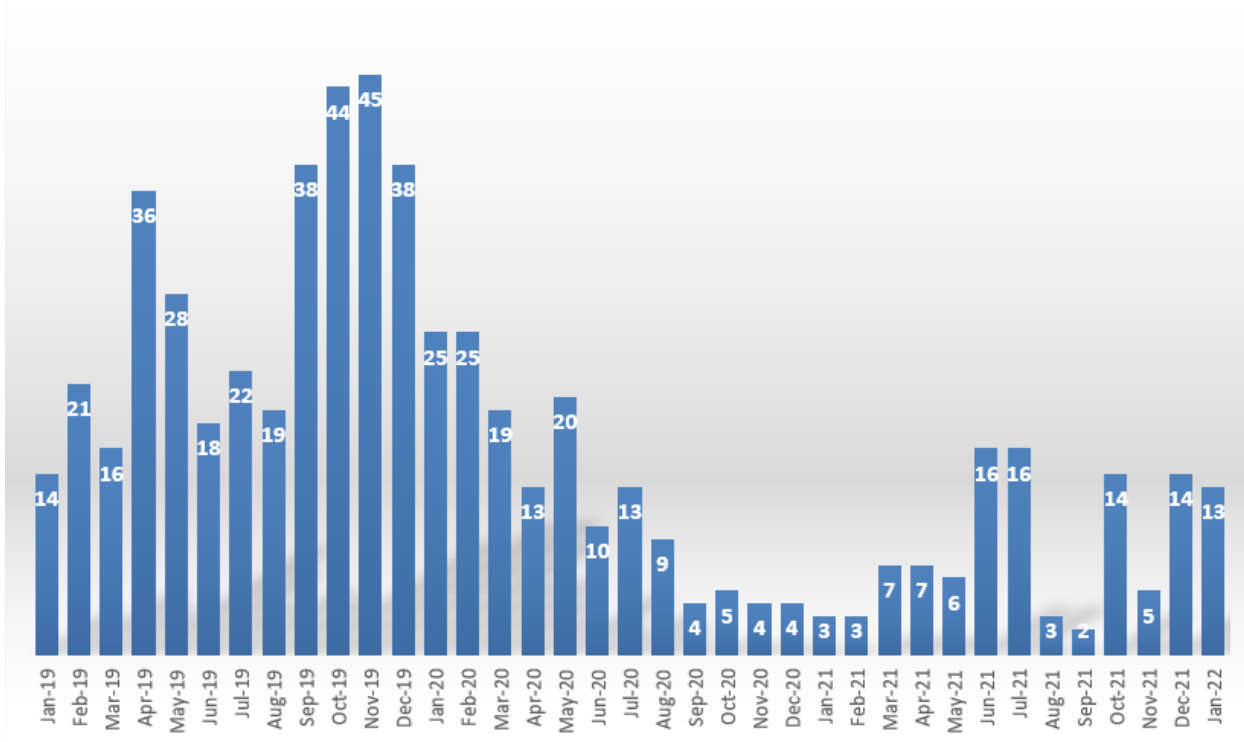
¹⁵ African Terrorism Database (2022). This information is available at African Union’s African Centre for the Study and Research on Terrorism (ACS-RT), based in Algiers, Algeria. Information retrieved on 21/02/2022.

¹⁶ Mednick, S. (2022). Burkina Faso army overthrows President Kabore in Africa’s latest coup. retrieved on February 21, 2022 (<https://www.stuff.co.nz/world/africa/300502875/burkina-faso-army-overthrows-president-kabore-in-africas-latest-coup>).

¹⁷ African Terrorism Database (2022). This information is available at African Union’s African Centre for the Study and Research on Terrorism (ACS-RT), based in Algiers, Algeria. Information retrieved on 21/02/2022

¹⁸ Dozens killed in Burkina Faso hotel attack. France24. 17/01/16. <https://www.france24.com/en/20160116-live-security-forces-launch-assault-burkina-hotel>

Figure 3: Monthly Terrorist Attacks in Burkina Faso



Source: ACSRT Terrorism Database, 2022

In response to the growing terrorist attacks, President Roch Kaboré progressively increased the defence budget.

Between 2017 to 2019, it was increased by some 80% from US\$205 million, to US\$373 million.¹⁹ This increase, along with the creation of groups like Volunteers for the Defence of the Homeland (VDP); intensive counter terrorism operations by international, regional, and national forces; as well as the conflict between JNIM and ISGS; led to a 12% decrease in terrorist attacks in 2020 from the previous year, as shown in Figure 3.²⁰ This was the first reduction since 2016. Unfortunately, several lethal attacks occurred in 2021. This included the 5 June Solhan massacre, which killed at least 160 people, as well as the 14

November attack at a gendarmerie post at Inata, where 54 gendarmes and three others perished.²¹ This led to discontent among the rank and file of military and the general population, creating impetus towards the overthrow of the democratically elected president.

Due to its geographic location, Niger is exposed to terrorism and other trans-border criminal activities on multiple fronts. While JNIM and its affiliates are a source of insecurity at the border with Mali and Burkina Faso, Boko Haram and ISWAP carry out repeated attacks along the frontier with Nigeria – particularly in the Diffa region. The ISGS also has a stronghold in the Tillabéri region, from where it launches attacks against both Niger and Malian security forces.

¹⁹ Terrorism in the Sahel: facts and figures. 3rd Joint NSD-S HUB & ACSRT Four-Monthly Report. Jan 2019 to Dec 2020. Retrieved on January 02, 2022 (<https://caert.org.dz/Reports/NSDS-HUB-ACSRT-Sep-2020.pdf>).

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Burkina Faso: A history of destabilization by jihadist insurgencies. France24. 25/01/22. <https://www.france24.com/en/africa/20220125-burkina-faso-a-history-of-destabilisation-by-jihadist-insurgencies>.

Nigerien security forces have stepped up operations against the terrorist groups, resulting in a considerable decline in the number of attacks.

In the Lake Chad Basin, both the Al-Qaeda affiliate groups – Boko Haram and its breakaway Islamic State affiliate, ISWAP – have dominated the terrorism landscape. While the two groups continued to launch limited terrorist attacks in south-western Chad, their major areas of operation have been in the north-eastern Nigerian States of Adamawa, Borno and Yobe.

In South-Western Chad, Boko Haram and ISWAP have mainly targeted the military in their attacks. For instance, on 4 April 2019, armed members from Boko Haram attacked a military post at Bouham, killing seven soldiers. Security forces, in a reprisal attack, killed 63 of the assailants. Similarly, 11 Chadian soldiers were killed in the Lake Chad Basin area by Boko Haram on 23 June 2019. However, the deadliest attack against Chadian forces by Boko Haram occurred on 23 March 2020, when the group attacked a military base on Boma island – killing 92 soldiers²². The Multi-National Joint Task Force (MNJTF) has considerably reduced the momentum and degraded the capabilities of both groups, subsequently lowering the number of their attacks in Chad.

International Response to the Current Coups d'état and Political Instability

The recent overthrow of governments in the Sahel could be viewed as a dangerous fallout of prioritizing counterterrorism efforts while neglecting obvious governance challenges, local grievances, and concerns. The overthrow of President Kaboré was the fourth coup in

the Western Sahel in 18 months, starting with the August 2020 coup in Mali, the April 2021 coup in Chad, and Mali's 'coup within a coup' in May 2021. These coups spurred widespread condemnation, including from West African leaders (from the Economic Community of West African States, or ECOWAS), the AU, European Union (EU), UN, US, and France – which had deployed troops to Mali to fight extremists.

Following the first coup in Mali, ECOWAS – in line with the relevant provisions of its Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance – imposed trade restrictions and border closures, and suspended Mali from all its decision-making bodies. Following dialogue with the military junta by ECOWAS-appointed mediator, former president of Nigeria Goodluck Jonathan, the junta subsequently handed over power to a civilian-led transitional government and pledged to hold elections within 18 months. This culminated in the lifting of sanctions by ECOWAS, except for the country's suspension from ECOWAS-related proceedings.

The second coup toppled the interim civilian-led government in May 2021, after the military junta accused transitional President Bah N'Daw and Prime Minister Moctar Ouane of failing their duties. This disrupted the transition calendar, which required that presidential elections be conducted before 27 February 2022.

ECOWAS called on Malian authorities to honour their commitment to hold elections by February 2022 in line with the Transition Charter.

The 4th Extraordinary Session of the Authority of Heads of State and Government of ECOWAS was held in Accra, Ghana, on 9 January 2022 to review the political situation in Mali. Here, the junta submitted a new

²² Al Jazeera. 92 Chad soldiers killed in 'deadliest' Boko Haram attack. Retrieved 27/02/2022 (<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/3/25/92-chad-soldiers-killed-in-deadliest-boko-haram-attack>).



Second ECOWAS Extraordinary Summit on the Political Situation in Burkina Faso, held on 4 February 2022. © Office of the President, Republic of Ghana.

transition calendar, proposing the end of December 2026 as the period for holding elections. ECOWAS rejected the proposed transition period and imposed new diplomatic, trade and economic sanctions, which many have described as draconian.

In the case of Burkina Faso, ECOWAS suspended the country on Friday 28 January 2022, in line with its protocol. However, the regional body did not impose sanctions against the country.

The differences in ECOWAS' approaches were partly motivated by the backlash it had received after imposing sanctions on Mali,

and more significantly, a so-called demonstration of commitment by the military junta in Burkina Faso to hand over power to a civilian-led transitional government, following a meeting with the ECOWAS Chiefs of Defence Staff and ministerial level envoys on 3 February. Consequently, the ECOWAS Heads of State called on the military rulers to return to constitutional order as soon as possible.²³

The ECOWAS sanctions on both Mali and Burkina Faso were endorsed by the Peace and Security Council (PSC) of the AU. With Chad, however, the PSC embraced the military transition and opposed any suspension from AU institutions, which they believed would further fuel the instability in the country and the wider region.²⁴ Many analysts described

²³ Burkina Faso coup: West African bloc hold off on new sanctions. DW. 04/02/22. <https://amp.dw.com/en/burkina-faso-coup-west-african-bloc-hold-off-on-new-sanctions/a-60654646>.

²⁴ Paul-Simon Handy and Felicite Djilo (2021). AU balancing act on Chad's coup sets a disturbing precedent. <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/au-balancing-act-on-chads-coup-sets-a-disturbing-precedent>, 21/02/2022.

the PSC decision on Chad as a double standard in asserting the AU's principles on unconstitutional changes of government.²⁵

Both the AU and ECOWAS called on the international community to support the sanctions against Mali.

At the United Nation Security Council (UNSC), Russia and China blocked the Council from endorsing the new ECOWAS sanctions on Mali.²⁶ The EU, however, on 4 February, imposed sanctions on five senior members of Mali's transitional government, including Prime Minister Choguel Maïga – accusing them of working to obstruct and undermine the transition from military to civilian rule. Others affected by the EU asset freezes and travel bans include purported members of the inner circle of Col. Assimi Goïta, comprising Malick Diaw, President of the National Transition Council; Ismael Wague, Minister for Reconciliation; Ibrahim Ikassa Maïga, Minister for Refoundation; and Adama Ben Diarra, member of the Transitional Council.²⁷ Similarly, the US government's Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) suspended \$450 million in aid to Burkina Faso, and described the coup as being at odds with MCC's commitment to democratic governance and respect for rule of law.

These international condemnations and sanctions are politically and normatively justifiable. Yet there are concerns that this approach is likely to cause severe hardship and serious disruption to economies in the Western Sahel that have already been ravaged by multifaceted security challenges – and the COVID-19 pandemic.

Implications on the Fight against Violent Extremism and Terrorism

The ongoing political crisis in the Western Sahel will no doubt have a significant impact on national, regional and international responses to terrorism and violent extremism.

At the national level, there is likely to be a vacuum in terms of the strategic direction needed to fight terrorism and violent extremism, due to the fractured and weak political leadership in the region.²⁸ For instance, prior to his demise, Idriss Déby Itno of Chad was considered a stabilising force in the region and a major international ally in the fight against groups such as Boko Haram, ISWAP, JNIM and ISGS in the Lake Chad Basin, as well as the tri-border region of Liptako-Gourma of Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso.²⁹ He provided the strong political leadership not only to the well-financed and competent Chadian military, but also to the regional joint efforts through the MNJTF and G5 Sahel Force. His sudden death, and the ensuing tense and fragmented political landscape in Chad, has left behind a leadership vacuum that has already hampered momentum in the fight against violent extremist groups. There is a risk of in-fighting within the Chadian military and the circles of power if the political transition is not managed well.

The consequences of Idriss Déby's demise could spill over to the entire Central African region and even Sudan's Darfur region,

as that country grapples to return to constitutional order. Just as the instability in Libya, for instance, continues to affect

²⁵ See PSC Insights. The AU reneges on its stance against coups d'état. <https://issafrica.org/pscreport/psc-insights/the-au-reneges-on-its-stance-against-coups-detat>, 20/02/2022.

²⁶ Russia and China block UN support on ECOWAS Mali sanction. <https://mrdeshh.wordpress.com/2022/01/13/russia-and-china-block-un-support-on-ecowas-mali-sanction/>.

²⁷ EU imposes sanctions on Mali Junta Members. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32022R0156&from=EN>

²⁸ VOA. (2022). Experts Say Death of Chad's Deby Will Impact Regional Security. https://www.voanews.com/a/africa_experts-say-death-chads-deby-will-impact-regional-security/6204969.html, 6 February 2022.

²⁹ Michelle Gavin (2021). The Unfolding Consequences of Idriss Déby's Death. <https://www.cfr.org/blog/unfolding>, 8 February 2022.

Chad, any destabilisation of Chad can have immediate consequences on the Darfur region. Darfur has experienced armed conflicts for several decades because of its historical connections to the Western Sahel and the Maghreb region.³⁰

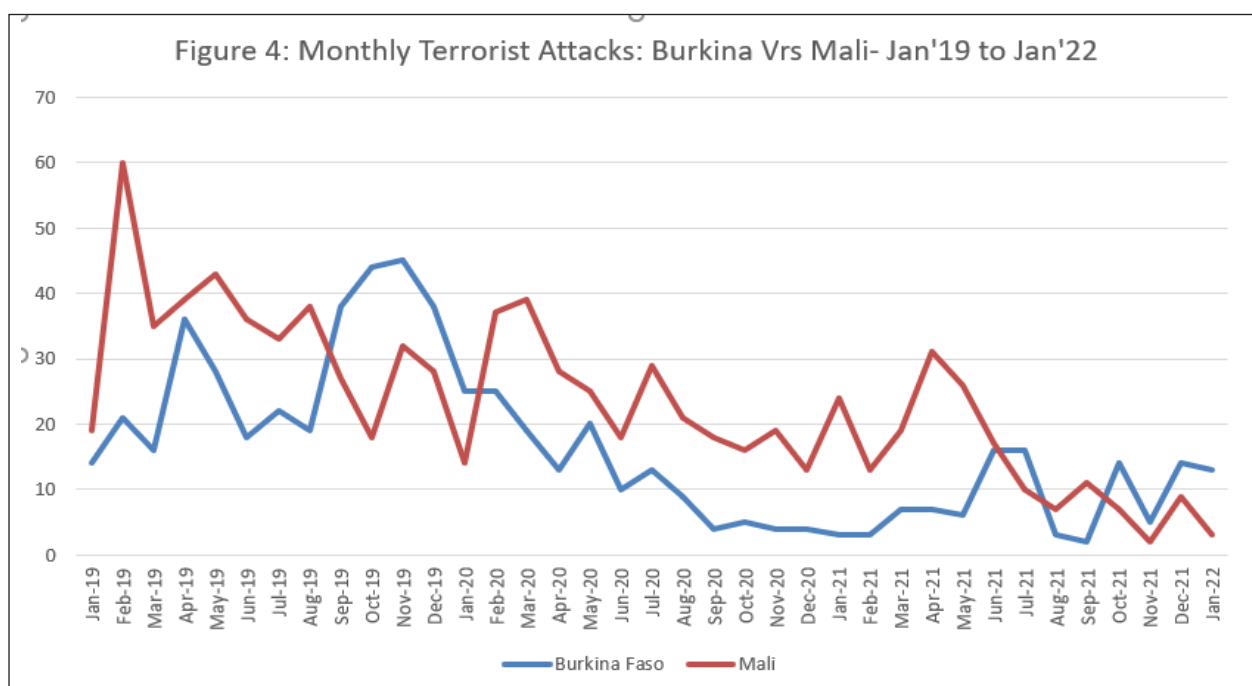
For the fight against terrorism in the Western Sahel, the effects of the political situation in Chad have further exacerbated by the recent coups in Mali and Burkina Faso, which have left both countries with an extremely weak political leadership. These two states are now led by military personnel who arguably lack the international credibility, political fortitude, and experience needed to address imminent challenges.

Statistics from the ACSRT Terrorism Database from January 2019 to January 2022 (Figure 4) show a downward trend in the number of terrorist attacks before the coups in these countries. This means that while the two ousted presidents may not have adequately responded to the terrorist threats, they achieved some modest gains in reducing attacks. Sustaining these short-term gains or achievements may be difficult due to the current leadership crises and political

uncertainties. Given the political transition challenges, especially in Mali, it is evident that the kind of strong political leadership and strategic foresight needed to fight terrorism and violent extremism may further wane. The president of Niger, Mohamed Bazoum, who could fill the regional leadership vacuum, is also facing internal challenges such as attempted military coups, insurgency, drought and wide-spread poverty. His focus will mostly be on addressing Niger's internal matters to consolidate his power, and to avert the same coup predicament of his counterparts in Mali and Burkina Faso. Therefore, as the military-dominated transition authorities in both Mali and Burkina Faso wrestle for power in the capital cities,

the terrorist and violent extremist groups are likely to benefit from the distracted central governments.

Al-Qaeda and Islamic State-linked groups in the Sahel may continue to commit violent attacks in their bid to undermine domestic and regional security.



Source: ACSRT Terrorism Database, 2022

³⁰ Biajo, N. (2021). Sudanese Analysts: Chad Military Takeover Will Likely Cause Instability in Darfur Region. <https://www.voanews.com/a/africa-south-sudan-focus>.



According to the UN, levels of need in Mali are now higher than at any point since 2012, with an overall total of around 7.5 million citizens in need of assistance. © The Maravi Post

Beyond the political leadership vacuum, the capacity of states to fight terrorism may also be weakened by the international sanctions and persistent internal challenges. The weakness of state institutions is reflected in many ways. First, in Mali, the leadership vacuum is exacerbated by the cessation of defence and security assistance by Western allies due to the coup; the alleged new orientation of the military and security cooperation of the country with non-state actors; as well as the diplomatic, trade and financial sanctions of ECOWAS.

In particular, the alleged involvement of a Russian private military company; the proposed withdrawal of French forces; and the gradual international isolation of Mali through sanctions may negatively affect the international financial and technical support. The country needs this support to address the deteriorating security and humanitarian situation caused by terrorism, violent extremism and communal conflicts.³¹

Second – the ECOWAS sanctions against Mali and the negative consequences on the economy, coupled with the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the country's systemic challenges – may hinder the essential investment required for state authority and services to be extended throughout the country. There are limited resources for strengthening the country's socio-political resilience to overcome the persistent challenges and to support the political transition processes. This can significantly undermine the fight against terrorism and violent extremism, and allow the terrorist groups operating in northern and central Mali to further ingratiate themselves with local populations by providing basic services, resources and other materials that the central government has persistently failed to deliver.³²

Such propaganda efforts may increase civilian support for terrorist groups in some areas.

³¹ Aubyn, F.K. (2022), ECOWAS Sanctions Against Mali Necessary, but May Be Counter-Productive. <https://theglobalobservatory.org/2022/02/ecowas-sanctions-against-mali-necessary-but-may-be-counter-productive/>, 7 February 2022

³² Steve Rakowski (2022). Mali's Recent Coup Exposes Country's Profound Weaknesses. <https://crisis24.garda.com/insights-intelligence/insights/articles/malis-recent-coup-exposes-countrys-profound-weaknesses>.

It may also provide these groups with additional intelligence sources and the manpower to expand and continue their violent attacks with impunity within and beyond the territories where they currently operate.

Third, the impact of the political crisis may give violent extremist and terrorist groups the opportunity to further consolidate their authority and influence in the areas where they control, and even expand to new geographical areas outside the Western Sahel.

In Burkina Faso, prior to the coup, the defence and security forces were confronted with serious internal weaknesses and dissensions.

The increase in defence spending was not enough to properly equip and reform the entire security sector after the fall of Blaise Compaoré's 30-year regime.³³ Indeed, the limited results of counter-terrorism efforts in the country can be partially attributed to these factors and others, including discontent and frustrations among security forces on the frontlines, who have suffered most from ongoing terrorist attacks.

Given the international condemnation of the coup, transitional authorities are unlikely to benefit from the same support as the democratic regime before them had received to equip the security and defence forces. The focus of the transitional authorities may be on either consolidating their power, or addressing the political situation to restore constitutional order – rather than fighting terrorism.

Moreover, not all elements in the security and defence forces may be loyal to the coup leaders. This can cause counter coups and

further fragmentation within the military, with far-reaching consequences for the fight against terrorism. Internal weaknesses within the Burkinabe military can play into the hands of terrorists and violent extremist groups, who will seek to exploit these vulnerabilities and the attention being directed towards politics in the capital, Ouagadougou, to increase their targeting of civilian and security forces. This could trigger population displacements and movements into neighbouring countries, and accelerate the deterioration of the security situation in the coastal countries – including Ghana, Togo, Benin and Côte d'Ivoire.

Similarly, in Chad, the military has been left as a weak institution with a serious risk of infighting.³⁴ The army is marred by internal rivalry between commanders and ethnic divisions; which Idriss Déby had managed through personal negotiations. Loyalties within the military were to him and not the military leadership, or the state. With the current political uncertainty in the country, it is unclear whether the Transitional Military Council will devote greater efforts and attention to combating transnational terrorist threats.

Indeed, in August 2021, Chad announced that it was recalling 600 of its 1,200 contingents from the G-5 Sahel Force. Depending on how the political situation evolves, the joint operations and capacity of the two dominant ad hoc coalitions in the region, namely the MNJTF and the G5-Sahel Force, may be negatively impacted by the common fragilities, including increased tensions within the security apparatus, a lack of equipment and difficulties in controlling their territory.³⁵

³³ Méryl Demuynck and Julie Coleman, (2022), Political Upheaval and Counter-Terrorism in Burkina Faso: Between a Rock and a Hard Place. <https://icct.nl/publication/political-upheaval-and-counter-terrorism-in-burkina-faso/>, 10 February 2022.

³⁴ Alexandre Marc. (2021). The death of Chadian President Idris Déby Itno threatens stability in the region. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2021/04/29/the-death-of-chadian-president-idris-deby-itno-threatens-stability-in-the-region/>.

³⁵ Virginie Baudais. (2020). The impact of the Malian crisis on the Group of Five Sahel countries: Balancing security and development priorities. <https://www.sipri.org/commentary/topical-background/2020/impact>, accessed 8 February 2022.

Conclusion and Recommendations on the Way Forward

The escalating insecurity in the Sahel, mainly caused by terrorist and violent extremist groups, has partly contributed to the region's current political turmoil. The current situation in Mali, Burkina Faso and Chad is therefore not conducive to fighting terrorism and violent extremism. Internal political challenges are creating a leadership vacuum. This has contributed to a gradual weakening of both the capacity and the resolve of states to ensure a more robust response to the threat, and to re-establish security in troubled areas. As the political and security situation in the region deteriorates, it is crucial to resolve the domestic political conundrums to promote a more robust response to terrorism and violent extremism.

It is against this background that the response from ECOWAS, the AU, and rest of the international community be exercised with determination, caution and discretion. The complex situation requires flexibility, pragmatism, and skilled diplomacy to avoid exacerbating the precarious security situation. To achieve this, the following recommendations are made:

- Action taken to pressure the various military juntas to cede power must be crafted and implemented with extreme care to avoid causing more suffering and misery to an already impoverished population, as this would risk promoting solidarity with the juntas and playing into the hands of terrorist and violent extremist groups, as well as organised crime groups.
- The AU Panel of the Wise (PoW) should be deployed to consistently engage with the various transitional leaders together with ECOWAS, the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS) and other international partners for a swift return to constitutional order.
- Neighbouring countries affected by terrorism and violent extremism, including Algeria and Mauritania, should be fully

engaged to ensure unity of purpose and coordinated action.

- There is a need for comprehensive security sector reform in Mali, Burkina Faso, Chad and Niger to enhance capabilities, unlock possible funding, and improve the professionalism of the defence and security forces to address current capacity shortfalls that hinder an effective response to the terrorist threat.
- As the current attention of the transitional authorities in Mali, Burkina Faso and Chad is directed towards internal politics, the AU should consider collaborating with ECOWAS and ECCAS to take up the leadership role in fighting terrorism and violent extremism in Western Sahel. This could serve as an alternative to current ad hoc coalitions like G5-Sahel and MNJTF, which are unduly influenced by the interests of countries.
- The AU should also consider activating the **African Capacity for Immediate Response to Crisis (ACIRC)** to strengthen the counter terrorism response, particularly in Mali and Burkina Faso – where the need is urgent.
- The AU and ECOWAS should endeavour to undertake a joint assessment mission in Burkina Faso, Chad and Mali within the framework of subsidiarity and complementarity to understand the underlying causes of the recurring coups d'état. This will enable the relevant decision-making organs of the AU and ECOWAS to know what is and is not working, manage expectations of the various interest groups – including the military – and boost the effectiveness of political elites' response generation mechanisms to the various local specific grievances.
- Coastal countries in West Africa should elevate their state of preparedness to effectively respond to the lack of security in western Sahel, and the consequent humanitarian needs, based on regular security risk analysis.

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