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U.S. Strategy in the Sahel: Toward a Human Security-Centered Approach

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The United States's current counterterrorism strategy in the Sahel is ineffective and is contributing to the destabilization of the region. Despite pouring billions of dollars into security assistance and counterterrorism efforts in the Sahel, the U.S. has failed to help Sahel governments address the growing security threats posed by militant groups.

Behind this militarized and wasteful response to "terrorism" in the Sahel lies a misdiagnosis of the root causes of militancy, which has less to do with ideology and more with the economic and social grievances of citizens that have not been unaddressed and the related problems of poor governance. As the numbers of militant groups in the Sahel expand by capitalizing on the dissatisfaction and grievances that citizens feel, it is becoming evident that the current U.S. counterterrorism strategy in the Sahel is counterproductive.

The U.S. must urgently reassess its role in the Sahel security landscape and come up with a better, more comprehensive, and coherent strategy to help its partners address the Sahel's growing terrorist threat. It can do this by deemphasizing military interventions and instead prioritize diplomacy and dialogue to promote peace, and increased development assistance to promote human security.

The U.S.-led War on Terror in the Sahel Has Failed

The "global war on terror" which began under President George W. Bush's administration has fueled the expansion of the U.S. military footprint across the world.[1] Between 2018 and 2020, the U.S. undertook "counterterrorism" activities in 85 countries, including those in the Sahel region.[2] In Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, Chad, and Mauritania, the United States provides security forces with training and assistance in counter-terrorism, conducting military exercises, and participating in combat against militants.

For the amount of money the U.S. spends on its counterterrorism efforts in the Sahel, its partners should be seeing significant improvements in their capacity to prevent and contain militant extremist groups that are wreaking havoc in the region. But U.S. counterterrorism efforts in the Sahel have not helped reduce the number of extremist militant groups or protect innocent civilians from harm. In fact, the failure of the militarized response that the U.S. has employed in its counterterrorism efforts in the Sahel is reflected in the exponential growth in the number of violent attacks carried out by militant groups in the region.

The Current Security Landscape in the Sahel

The Sahel is one of the most fragile regions in the world that is facing a complex set of economic, social, and political challenges. In Sahel countries like Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso, conflict, widespread poverty, and climate change are fueling one of the fastest growing humanitarian crises[3] in the world. In recent years, the rise in intercommunal violence and the expansion of violent extremist groups has turned the Sahel into one of the most volatile[4] regions of the world.

According to the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), the Sahel saw a 35% increase[5] in organized political violence in 2020, with militant Islamist groups like Al Qaeda-affiliated Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) and Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) posing the greatest threat.

There are several key regional and international actors that are currently involved in the fight against violent extremist groups in the Sahel. The first major actor is France, which currently has 5,100 military personnel deployed in the region as part of its counterterrorism efforts called **Opération Barkhane.**[6] France's has been involved in the Sahel since 2013, when it launched a military operation in Mali called **Operation Serval** to stop the advance of Islamist militants moving towards Bamako. Operation Serval later became replaced by Opération Barkhane, which now provides broader support to Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Chad—4 of what are called the G5 Sahel countries, all of which were former colonies of France.[7]

In 2017, the G5 Sahel countries launched the G5 Cross-Border Joint Force "to fight terrorism, organized crime and human trafficking" in the region.[8] The Joint Force aimed to supplement the work that the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) was doing to provide security in the region.[9]

U.S. Involvement in the Sahel: How Did We Get Here?

In November 2002, the U.S. State Department launched the Pan-Sahel Initiative (PSI), "a program designed to protect borders, track movement of people, combat terrorism, and enhance regional cooperation and stability," in Mali, Chad, Niger, and Mauritania.[10] The PSI was launched due to a concern that some states in the Sahel could be a safe haven for terrorist groups linked to al-Qaeda. The PSI identified two main U.S. national security interests in the region: first, "waging war on terrorism," and two, "enhancing regional peace and security." It is this problematic idea of "waging war on terrorism" that would go on to shape the United States's wasteful and ineffective policy in the Sahel.

By 2005, the PSI was replaced by the Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership (TSCTP), a joint strategy by the Department of State, U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), and the Department of Defense (DOD).[11] The program aimed to help West and North African countries to "increase their immediate and long-term capabilities to address terrorist threats and prevent the spread of violent extremism." Besides providing training and equipping security forces in the Sahel, the TSCTP included goals to support youth employment, health and education services, and to bolster

local governance in communities that are especially vulnerable to "extremist ideologies." In addition to the original countries who were a part of the PSI, the TSCTP went on to include Algeria, Nigeria, Senegal, Morocco, Tunisia, and Burkina Faso.

While the launch of the TSCTP seemed like a step in the right direction for how the U.S. could go beyond a security-centric approach in the Sahel to deal with the multifaceted problem of violent extremism, a 2008 report by a U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) revealed gaps in its implementation.[12] The report examined the distribution of $353 million by the State Department, USAID, and DOD in nine partner countries between 2005 and 2007 and assessed the extent to which a "comprehensive" and "integrated" strategy was implemented during the program. The report found that the State Department did not have a "comprehensive strategy for the TSCTP," and that it needed to work with its partners to come up with "clear goals, objectives, and milestones, including output and outcome indicators, and identify resources needed to achieve the program's goals."[13] Despite the report's recommendations, the State Department has not created a strategy for TSCTP and continued to "use documents created in 2005 to guide the partnership."[14]

In 2007, the U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM) was created to oversee all U.S. military activities in Africa, including those in the Sahel.[15] The U.S. military footprint in Africa has grown under AFRICOM, with 29 U.S. military bases now present across the continent along with some 7,000 troops. Among the most recent bases established is the U.S. air base for armed drones in Agadez, Niger, built at a cost of more than $100 million, and which needs more than $30 million a year for maintenance.[16] AFRICOM now oversees train and equip programs, security assistance and joint military exercises across the continent, and provides logistics support and intelligence sharing with France in its counterterrorism efforts in the region.[17]

In March 2020, the State Department announced the creation of a Special Envoy for the Sahel, to maximize "U.S. diplomatic efforts to address the threat of Violent Extremist Organizations (VEOs)" in the region.[18] Ambassador J. Peter Pham became the first-ever U.S. Special Envoy for the Sahel and continues to serve in that role.

Misdiagnosing the Drivers of Militancy Fuels Bad Policy

"The Western and international and African efforts there are not getting the job done [in West Africa and the Sahel region] ...ISIS and al-Qaeda are on the march in West Africa. They're having success, and international efforts are not."[19]

- U.S. Africa Commander Army General Stephen Townsend, March 13, 2020

The security-centric approach to counterterrorism that the U.S. and its ally France are taking in the Sahel is failing because it overlooks the context-specific drivers of militancy in the region. While the U.S. is not the major foreign actor in the Sahel, by aiding France's "forever war" in the region, the U.S. is implicated in the growing instability.[20] What the United States's simplistic and careless usage of the label "terrorism" has done is diagnose the problem of the extremist violence in the Sahel as stemming from ideology, and not from poor governance, and political and economic marginalization of certain groups.

In 2017, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) published a report entitled *The Journey of Extremism in Africa,* to identify the reasons behind why people join extremist groups across the continent.[21] Its findings prove why the militarized approach that the U.S. and France are taking to fight extremism are failing. The report identified the following:

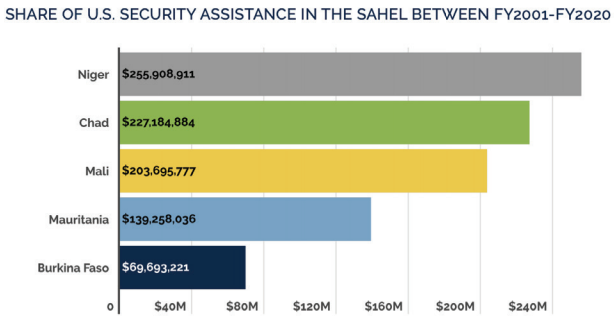
- Economic factors play a role in driving recruitment into extremist groups and employment was "the single most frequently cited 'immediate need' faced at the time of joining."
- Grievances towards, and limited trust in the government and security forces was "associated with the highest incidence of violent extremism."
- The majority of individuals joined extremist groups due to 'government action', and the 'killing of a family member or friend' or 'arrest of a family member or friend.'

The report concluded that "improved public policy and delivery of good governance by African governments confronted with extremism will ultimately represent a far more effective source of counterterrorism and PVE [Preventing Violent Extremism] than continued over-concentration on security-focused interventions."

The report is a direct rebuttal of the argument that a security-centric and militarized counterterrorism approach is the key to addressing the problem of violent extremism in Africa, especially in the Sahel.

U.S. Security Assistance Does More Harm than Good

Instead of helping its partners in the Sahel to prioritize effective governance and establishment of proper infrastructures that can address the political and economic grievances of citizens, the U.S. has poured over a billion dollars into security assistance programs and military operations that have yielded no success at curbing the threats posed by extremist groups.[22]



Source: Yousif, Elias, and Nani Detti. *U.S. Security Assistance to the Sahel*. *Security Assistance Monitor.* Center for International Policy, April 2021.[23]

In the Sahel, U.S. security assistance that was meant to build the capacity of military and security forces to effectively respond to terrorist threats has not acheived its goal for various reasons. First, there has been a lack of oversight and mismanagement of funds assigned to counterterrorism projects in the Sahel. In September 2020, an audit by the Office of the Inspector General (OIG) of the State Department's Bureau of African Affairs (AF)—which was tasked with overseeing the TSCTP—revealed that AF was not monitoring TSCTP "in accordance with Federal and Department requirements."[24] Out of the eight contracts that OIG audited, $201.6 million spent on six contracts was "potential wasteful spending due to mismanagement and inadequate oversight." Moreover, the report found that "AF was not ensuring that the assistance provided to the host countries was being used to build counterterrorism capacity."[25] In an earlier audit, the OIG had found that the U.S. Air Force "did not effectively plan, design, and construct" the $100 million air base in Agadez, Niger.[26]

Lack of oversight and monitoring is not the only gap that is observed in U.S. security assistance in the Sahel. In places with weak governance like Mali, progress towards addressing problems like corruption, U.S. security assistance has had unintended consequences of fueling corruption, and recruitment into terrorist groups. According to a 2018 report from the Security Assistance Monitor (SAM), in places like Mali, U.S. security assistance exacerbated corruption and governance concerns.[27] The report found the following:

- Corruption led to poor military leadership that contributed to the failure of U.S. counterterrorism efforts in the country.
- U.S. security assistance fed into the factional divisions within the Malian military, fueling protests and even a coup against President Amadou Toumani Touréin 2021 led by Captain Amadou Sanogo, who received training from the U.S.
- Instead of seeking to curb the illicit activities of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), a terrorist group operating in northern Mali, both the country's former President Amadou Toumani Touré and the Malian army "sought to benefit personally" from the group.

Perhaps the biggest problem with the United States's current security assistance programs in the Sahel is that it continues to give money to governments and security forces that have been implicated in grave human rights abuses. Security forces in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso have been accused of serious human rights violations including extrajudicial executions and unlawful killings. Between February 2020 and April 2020, Amnesty International documented "at least 57 cases of extrajudicial executions or unlawful killings, and at least 142 cases of enforced disappearances," by security forces in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso.[28] Human Rights Watch and the UN have also documented over 600 unlawful killings by security forces in the three countries, during counterterrorism operations.[29]

Why does the U.S. continue to provide security assistance to countries whose security forces have been implicated in gross human rights violations? After all, this fact contradicts AFRICOM's core mission of "contributing to the development of capable and professional militaries that respect human rights, adhere to the rule of law, and more effectively contribute to stability in Africa."[30] Unless the violent intervention of Western powers ends, the problems of ineffective

governance in the Sahel will not be addresses, and the region will not see an end to the violence and conflict it is experiencing due to extremist groups. If the U.S. is truly committed to having partners in the Sahel that respect human rights and respect the rule of law, then it must enforce the use of restrictions and conditions on the security assistance it provides. Countries whose security forces have been accused of or implicated in human rights violations should not continue to receive security assistance, as it emboldens them to continue acting with impunity.

As a key ally to governments in the Sahel, the U.S. must adopt a strategic and targeted approach to help countries address their human rights, economic and governance problems. The U.S. should require its partners in the Sahel to adequately address the grievances of citizens and restore citizens' trust in their governments and in security forces that have been implicated in human rights abuses. Instead of pouring more money into security assistance programs that lack oversight and are doing little to improve the stability of the Sahel, the U.S. must reverse its approach, be more transparent and address the problems it has created through its militarized intervention.

The U.S's Militarized Strategy Encourages Partners to Follow Suit

The billions of dollars that the U.S. has spent on security assistance, weapons, and operations, show where its priorities lie. By supporting a militarized response to the threats that the Sahel is facing from extremist groups, the U.S. is encouraging its African and international partners to do the same. For instance, according to SAM, in Mali, the U.S. provided $170 million in military aid between 2010-2018.[31] Over the same time period, Mali's military expenditure "increased by 233%" according to a report by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA).[32]

Sahel governments are not alone in their prioritization of military spending. France, the major actor in the Sahel's security space now finds itself in an endless war much like the U.S. found itself in Afghanistan and Iraq.[33] Niger's President Mohamed Bazoum recently called French counterterrorism efforts a "relative failure," pointing out that for the amount of time and money spent, the G5 partners of France expected "to have had better results" in their fight against extremism.[34]

The African Reality

"I would push back a little bit on the emphasis on the idea, if you will, the trope–and I really would call it a trope–that U.S. policy in the area is overly militarized."

- Ambassador J. Peter Pham, U.S. Special Envoy for the Sahel speaking at a press briefing on January 5, 2021

Despite promises of improved security and long-term stability, the wasteful, uncoordinated, and militarized U.S. and French counterterrorism responses have been ineffective in stabilizing the Sahel. This fact is reflected in the increase of the number of extremist groups that now operate in the region. According to the African Center for Strategic Studies, in 2020, the Sahel saw a 44% increase in violence, with 1,170 violent events and 4,122 fatalities involving militant Islamist groups being recorded.[35] Two militant groups, Macina Liberation Front (FLM) which has ties to JNIM, and the ISGS, have accounted for almost all attacks in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger.

The expansion of extremist groups in the Sahel has had devastating human costs. Violence and conflict in the region have displaced millions, with Burkina Faso accounting for most of the internally displaced persons (IDPs). According to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), in the past two years, violence and conflict in Burkina Faso "have led to the displacement of more than one million people in just two years and has left 3.5 million people in need of assistance–a 60 per cent increase from January 2020 to January 2021."[36] U.S. counterterrorism assistance in Burkina Faso is fueling intercommunal and ethnic tensions, further putting communities in danger.[37] In addition, threats from extremist groups are depriving Burkina Faso citizens of their right to participate in democratic processes such as elections on an equal footing. Between 300,000-350,000 Burkinabé citizens did not vote in the November 2020 elections that saw President Roch Marc Christian Kaboré re-elected, following threats against a number of polling stations and violence targeting particular communities.[38] The reality on the ground reveals that a shift needs to take place in the current U.S. policy in the Sahel from military interventions to prioritizing diplomacy and dialogue to promote peace.

Since most of the drivers of militancy in the Sahel have less to do with extremist ideology, and more with dissatisfaction in the conduct of governments and their security forces, dialogue and potential negotiations with militant groups could provide a better understanding of the motives of different groups. It can help separate those that are acting out of genuine belief in extremist ideology, from those who took up arms because they were marginalized and felt that their grievances were ignored. By working actively with civil society organizations and religious and community leaders on the ground, the U.S. can come up with a human security-centric counterterrorism response in the Sahel that considers the complex set of social, economic, and political factors at play. Advocating for inclusive policies that address youth unemployment, climate change and food insecurity in the Sahel should be a priority for U.S. foreign policy.

Prioritizing Diplomacy and Dialogue

If, as President Joe Biden's administration promised, "diplomacy–not military action–will always come first" in its foreign policy, then it must move beyond rhetoric and towards action in reforming its current counterterrorism approach in the Sahel.[39] It can begin by implementing the recommendations provided in the 2018 Stabilization Assistance Review (SAR), a framework developed by the State Department, USAID, and DOD to "best leverage U.S. diplomatic engagement, defense, and foreign assistance to stabilize conflict-affected area."[40] One of the recommendations that the report provided for how the U.S. can lead effective stabilization efforts in conflict-ridden regions like the Sahel is through the deployment of civilian-led stabilization teams that can "assess local conditions, engage local authorities, and direct and monitor programs."[41] The report emphasizes the need for the U.S. government to invest in civilian experts who can be deployed alongside U.S. military elements and serve as advisors during various stabilization efforts. Having a separate set of civilian experts trained in working in conflict environments can help address the overly militarized nature of U.S. involvement in the Sahel, as it helps avoid reliance on the military to oversee all stabilization efforts. An increased investment in U.S. diplomatic capabilities is also needed to engage more meaningfully with Sahel partners.

By putting diplomacy, and not military action, at the center of its counterterrorism efforts in the Sahel, the U.S. can also persuade and even inspire France, its key ally in the region, to do the same. The U.S. acting alone implementing reforms in its counterterrorism efforts in the Sahel will not achieve much in terms of addressing the root causes of the security threats from extremist groups. France, which currently has the biggest military presence in the region, must reassess its role and must be willing to work alongside the U.S. to reform its counterterrorism response.

Moreover, the U.S. should play a greater role in helping its partners strengthen local governments and in facilitating dialogue between communities affected by extremist violence and militants that are willing to negotiate. While negotiating with extremist groups comes with its own risks, and on its own cannot guarantee an end to the violence that communities are facing, signaling an openness to dialogue provides an opportunity to explore alternatives to a militarized response. If governments of countries in the Sahel show interest in negotiating with some of the militant groups operating in the region, the U.S. and France, as key counterterrorism partners, must support the move instead of rejecting it without consideration. For instance, in March 2020, JNIM issued a statement saying that it was ready to get into negotiations with the Malian government under the condition that the "racist, arrogant, French crusader occupation" ends.[42] But France has ruled out talks with groups like JNIM.[43] While there is no guarantee that talks between the Malian government and JNIM can end the violence that the group has been unleashing, it is encouraging that an avenue for dialogue has been initiated. For the longest time, western powers like the U.S. and France have refused to "negotiate with terrorists" arguing that such a move legitimizes terrorist groups and their means. But perhaps when opportunities for dialogue like the one with JNIM arise, it would serve the U.S. and France better to prioritize the decision of their Sahel partners on whether or not to engage with these groups. After all, if the goal of counterterrorism efforts is to protect civilians and prevent further expansion of violence, all avenues to restore peace must be explored, including potential negotiations with extremist groups.

The U.S. Should Encourage Non-military Alternatives

Countries in the Sahel should also learn from one another on ways to become more effective at preventing and responding to threats from extremist groups. In recent years, Mauritania has been able to successfully ward off attacks[44] from violent extremist groups

through a robust security sector reform that involved an overhaul of the military, effective border policing, dialogue with extremist groups, and a budget increase for intelligence services. The structural reforms that Mauritania put in place when it comes to its counterterrorism response has significantly minimized the threats it faced from extremist groups. The steps that Mauritania has taken to professionalize its police and intelligence forces offers a model that its neighbors in the Sahel can follow as they explore non-military alternatives to their counterterrorism approach.

Research has shown that police and intelligence services have a better chance at disrupting terrorist organizations compared to the military.[45] Instead of taking a militarized approach that has proven to be ineffective, the U.S., along with France, can refocus their efforts into helping their Sahel partners professionalize their police forces and intelligence services. This would reduce the current military footprint of both countries and help countries in the Sahel take the lead on counterterrorism efforts, instead of relying on the U.S. and France to solve their problems.

Cooperating with Regional and International Partners

The lack of cohesiveness between regional and international counterterrorism responses in the Sahel is a critical challenge to the fight against extremism in the region. The current security is crowded with regional and international actors that are pursuing their own strategy and priorities; this creates a duplication of security and development efforts that is counterproductive.

For instance, the Sahel Alliance, an initiative launched in 2017 by France, Germany, and the European Union (EU) is currently overseeing the implementation of over 800 projects in the Sahel worth €11.6 billion, due to be completed by 2022.[46] The Sahel Alliance has an ambitious goal of "ensuring the region's lasting and sustainable development" through projects targeting six areas:

1. Education and youth employment
2. Agriculture, rural development, food security
3. Energy and climate
4. Governance
5. Decentralization and basic services
6. Internal security

While it is encouraging that international actors are showing an interest in supporting countries in the Sahel to fill in gaps that exist in various sectors, a question arises of just how effective their efforts are considering how vast the number of projects they have decided to take on are. How does the Sahel Alliance measure the success of its projects? Are there assessments taking place to make sure that these projects are sustainable in the long-term? Unfortunately, it is difficult to find clear answers to these questions. While regional organizations like the African Development Bank (AfDB) are partners to the Sahel Alliance, it is not clear what its role is in the oversight of these projects.

An overview of the actors involved in the crowded security landscape of the Sahel also paints a concerning picture of how uncoordinated and duplicated efforts are stifling progress towards meaningfully addressing threats from extremist groups. First, we have the G5 Sahel Joint Force (led by Mali, Niger, Mauritania, Chad, and Burkina Faso), and the Multinational Joint Task Force (led by Nigeria, Benin, Cameroon, Chad, and Niger). Then we have ECOWAS, which is currently overseeing its own counterterrorism strategy in West Africa worth $2.3 billion.[47] Next, there is the AU and UN-backed MINUSMA, and finally the U.S. and France, each leading counterterrorism operations under the TSCTP and Opération Barkhane, respectively.

With multiple national, regional, and international efforts taking place, it is difficult to know what role each actor plays and what gaps it is filling that others aren't. In order to avoid the duplication of security efforts and become more effective at addressing extremism in the Sahel, all actors that are currently involved in counterterrorism efforts in the region must clarify their roles and cooperate with each other to come up with a cohesive and complementary strategy. Instead of having a separate set of priorities and strategy, establishing consistent communication to understand the gap that each actor is filling in the counterterrorism response in the Sahel can save time, money, and ultimately lives.

Conclusion

The current U.S. counterterrorism strategy in the Sahel is failing, and an urgent reconceptualization is needed to address a growing crisis in the region. While the U.S. is not solely responsible for the failure to curb the expansion of extremist groups in the Sahel, it is the country that contributes millions to security assistance and as a key ally to France, which has the largest

military presence in the region. The U.S. can play a significant role in shaping a more effective response moving forward.

The U.S. can be a better ally to its partners in the Sahel by:

- Prioritizing diplomacy, not military action in its counterterrorism response
- Helping countries build their economies and effective governance
- Creating a better strategy for cooperation with regional and international partners
- Achieving greater transparency and accountability as part of its reduced security assistance program
- Putting less emphasis on building the military capabilities of countries, and more on intelligence and police services

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1. The term "human security" that I will be using throughout this paper encompasses personal, economic, health, food, environmental, community, and political security. The definition I am using is based on the 1994 United Nations Development Programme report, New Dimensions of Human Security. Human security doesn't replace state security. A human-centered response to threats seeks to provide a comprehensive solution, and prioritizes the well-being of individuals and communities.
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