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**The presence of Jihadist  
Terrorism in the Sahel**

**A Comparative Analysis between Burkina Faso, Mali,  
and Niger**

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## ABSTRACT

The Sahel is an African region covering the northern part of the African continent. The Sahel is bordered by the Sahara Desert and the Sudanese savannah, and is characterized by political, economic, and social fragility. However, as this paper will demonstrate, these are not the only problems the region is facing. One of the most topical issues in the Sahel and the world, is the increase in jihadist activity. Without presupposing anything, we will analyze the concept of terrorism, its characteristics, and different classifications, to continue with terrorism acting in the name of Islam. We will then present the efforts to deal with this threat and provide the most relevant features of this activity. Then, the origins of the Sahel region – considered as a social conglomerate of different peoples - will be analyzed in depth, where factors such as colonialism and international presence will be considered. In turn, the jihadist groups present, and the failures of counterterrorism will be explored. Finally, a comparative study will be made of three countries in the region (Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger) in terms of attacks, firearms trafficking, and international intervention in the area. The aim is to better understand the causes and context that promote terrorist activity, which has led to immense instability throughout the region.

Keywords: Sahel, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, France, jihadism, terrorism, firearms trafficking.

## RESUMEN

El Sahel es una región africana que abarca la parte septentrional del continente africano. Limita con el desierto del Sahara y la sabana sudanesa, y se caracteriza por su fragilidad política, económica y social. Sin embargo, como se demostrará en este documento, estos no son los únicos problemas a los que se enfrenta la región. Uno de los temas de mayor actualidad en el Sahel y en el mundo, es el aumento de la actividad yihadista. Sin presuponer nada, analizaremos el concepto de terrorismo, sus características y diferentes clasificaciones, para continuar con el terrorismo que actúa en nombre del Islam. A continuación, presentaremos los esfuerzos para hacer frente a esta amenaza y ofreceremos las características más relevantes de esta actividad. Después, se analizarán en profundidad los orígenes de la región del Sahel -considerada como un conglomerado social de diferentes pueblos-, donde se considerarán factores como el colonialismo y la presencia internacional. A su vez, se explorarán los grupos yihadistas presentes y los fallos de la lucha antiterrorista. Por último, se realizará un estudio comparativo de tres países de la región (Burkina Faso, Mali y Níger) en cuanto a atentados, tráfico de armas de fuego e intervención internacional en la zona. El objetivo es comprender mejor las causas y el contexto que promueven la actividad terrorista, que ha provocado una inmensa inestabilidad en toda la región.

Palabras clave: Sahel, Mali, Burkina Faso, Níger, Francia, yihadismo, terrorismo, tráfico de armas de fuego.

## ACRONYMS

Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)

Armed Islamic Group (GIA)

Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS)

European External Action Service (EEAS)

Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS)

Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM)

Macina Liberation Front (FLM)

Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO)

National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA)

The Islamic State (IS)

United Nations Agency for Refugees (UNHCR)

United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA)

United Nations Office for West Africa, and the Sahel (UNOWAS)

Volontaires pour la Défense de la Patrie (VDP)

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The Sahel region, on the African continent, is affected by a deterioration of stability that threatens social peace. Millions of people are facing political, economic, environmental, migratory and radicalization crises, among others. Moreover, in recent decades, jihadist terrorism has found its place in the region, where it is growing disproportionately.

In this situation of extreme crisis, catastrophe and emergency, the role of religion is transcendental. Citizens are affected by the terrorist activity of various religious radical groups, which generate scenarios of fear and chaos. The branch of international relations that deals with these events is complex, as there are currently other events that are more relevant in the eyes of major world leaders. With the threat of terrorism and the geostrategic importance of the Sahel, the presence and interest of world powers in the African region has also increased. The global commitment and effort against the emergence of jihadism in the Sahel is forceful through international collaboration with national governments. The goal the United Nations and the European Union is to make this violent extremism disappear, but this threat is shared within and outside the continent, and underdevelopment and social frustration must be addressed to curb the growth of jihadist followers.

In the countries of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, political instability and insecurity have led to the seizure of political power by their militaries in recent times and they have suffered coups d'état. These cases have in common that the states are facing the threat of Islamist insurgency. The insurgents are bent on imposing extremist and anti-democratic political ideologies, including the establishment of an Islamic caliphate throughout the region.

### 1.1 Objectives of the study

The main objective of the study is to analyze the relevance of jihadism in the Sahel, and the causes that have led to an increase in terrorist activity, as well as efforts to address this threat. Analyzing how in recent years jihadism has been successful in the area through attacks and recruitment of followers can help protect and enhance counterterrorism efforts. At the same time, understanding why religious principles,

climate change or firearms trafficking are relevant to the issue can help in a more accurate assessment of the situation.

The theoretical framework will explain in depth the necessary concepts and terms that will be used throughout the work, serving as a basis for the analysis section. In this part, terms such as "Sahel", "terrorism", "colonialism", or "international intervention", as well as academic papers and publications from specialized centers, will provide the basis for assessing the situation, and for the subsequent consideration of the disparities in the different countries.

Our analysis will provide a comprehensive description of the Sahel region, focusing on its origins and the effects of colonialism. This research will also conduct a study of jihadist terrorism in the region, describing each of them and comparing how they operate. In addition, it will assess how the death in 2011 of the then president of Libya, Muammar Gaddafi, contributed to the increased terrorist and firearms presence, as well as the Tuareg rebellion and the proclamation of the independence of Azawad in 2012 meant an increase in Islamization and terrorist pressure in Mali.

The objective is to assess the different points that can facilitate the presence of terrorists in the Sahel, to draw a series of conclusions about this case, as well as to gain a better understanding of the issue and to prevent terror and instability in the Sahel countries from spreading to other countries. It will also provide an overview of the current national situation, considering the attacks, the international presence, and the anti-terrorist efforts, which vary from country to country. In relation to this last point, it will highlight the analysis of three countries with different contexts: Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger. Finally, the last section will set out the conclusions reached through the research, highlighting the difficulties, and offering a series of recommendations for possible future research in this area.

## 1.2 Justification of the Topic

After majoring in security and foreign policy and studying various subjects on religion and religious affairs in international relations, my curiosity was piqued by studying Islamic law. In this area of security, Salafist extremism and Shariah drew my attention,



because of their international repercussions and because of the little information available from the African continent. In turn, many questions arose about the importance of religion in the contemporary world, since in this case it is putting at stake the peace, governance, and progress of Africans. This curiosity led me to reflect on and study the presence of jihadism in the Sahel region. Since religion and international relations take on greater significance during events of such magnitude, this research will delve into the activity of the various Islamic groups in the different Sahel nations, and their impact on them.

## 2. STATE OF THE AFFAIRS

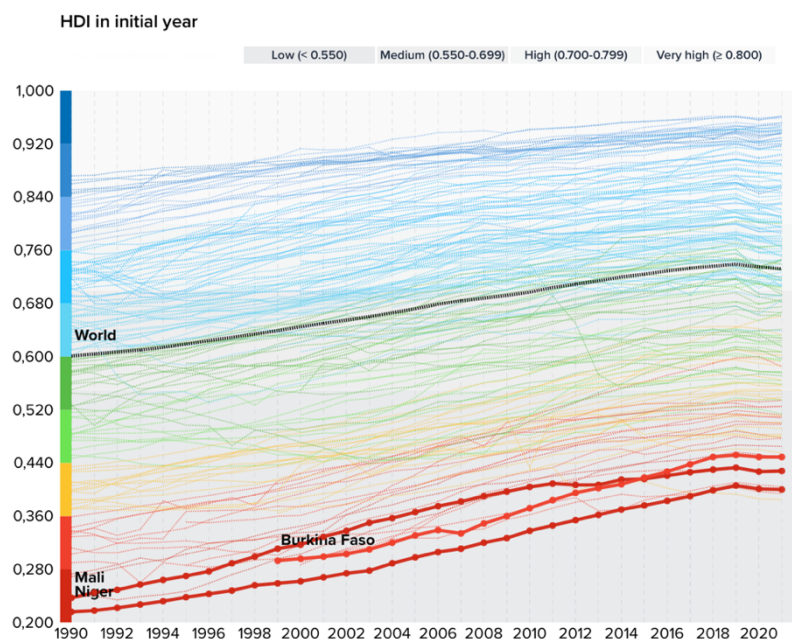
The Sahel region constitutes the area between East and West Africa comprising four countries surrounding Lake Chad (Cameroon, Chad, Niger, and northeastern Nigeria), as well as Burkina Faso, Gambia, Guinea, Mali, Mauritania, and Senegal (Agence France Presse, 2020). These ten countries span over seven million square kilometers, between the Sahara Desert and the savannah lands of North and Central Africa (May & Guengant, 2014).

The Sahel is known for its rich cultural history, as many ancient and medieval societies grew up there. In addition, it is characterized by extreme changes in climate, with very little rainy season and a long and intense dry season (Ferguson and Helmer, 2022). With total fertility rates between 4.1 and 7.6 children per woman on average (Cincotta & Smith, 2021), by 2030, the population is expected to reach 438.325 million people. However, this increase is not accompanied by economic growth (AECID, 2022, p.5).

Despite significant GDP growth in recent years, millions of people in the region are at risk of food insecurity due to climate shocks and insecurity, and most of the countries rank poorly on the latest Human Development Index (HDI) (UNDP, 2022). The G5's Climate and Country Development Report predicts that up to 13.5 million people in the region could fall into poverty due to climate change by 2050 without urgent action. Women's education and training remain major challenges. In addition, the capacity of Sahelian states to provide basic public services and control their territories is limited, with a low number of government employees per head of population compared to other countries (World Bank Group, 2022).

Like the rest of the world's regions, the Sahel has also been negatively affected by the latest global COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine, which has intensified political, economic, and social difficulties. In addition, extreme weather conditions and weak governance, have considerably aggravated the internal problems faced by the government, further accentuated by events of internal violent confrontation between different actors at the national level (World Bank, 2022). In a recent report, the UN Office for West Africa, and the Sahel (UNOWAS) noted that in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, terrorism caused more than 4,000 fatalities in 2019. Tensions and conflicts in these countries, have caused numerous human losses, destruction of infrastructure or forced displacement and suffering of a large number of people (Ngom, 2021).

Table 1. (UNDP, 2022).<sup>1</sup>



## 2.1 Burkina Faso

Burkina Faso is a landlocked country in West Africa, bordered by Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana and Togo to the south, Benin to the southeast, Mali to the northwest and Niger to the

<sup>1</sup> Source: UNDP. (2022). *Country insights HDI*. United Nations Human Development Reports. Retrieved April 10 from <https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/country-insights#/ranks>.

east. Its capital is Ouagadougou, and the country has a population of 22 million in 2021. Burkina Faso ranked 184th in the 2022 HDI (UNDP, 2022) and has become the country most affected by jihadist violence in the Sahel region. The violence has also led to a coup d'état against President Roch Kaboré, which has not improved the situation. In 1983, Captain Thomas Sankara seized power in Burkina Faso and adopted radical leftist policies, but was assassinated by Blaise Compaore, who ruled for 27 years before being overthrown in a popular revolt in 2014. After a failed coup attempt against the interim government, general elections were held on November 29, 2015, and Roch Marc Christian Kaboré of the People's Movement for Progress won with 53 percent of the vote, becoming the first democratically elected president in Burkina Faso and the first civilian to take office since Maurice Yaméogo's government (Echenberg, Dresch & Guiguemde, 2023). Burkina Faso was free of jihadist terrorism until 2015, when the country became a target of jihadist attacks by Mali-based groups following the overthrow of Compaoré (International Crisis Group, 2017, p.1). The new government has pledged to strengthen the national army and create dialogue committees with local leaders, but the country remains in crisis and the state has lost control of more than 40 percent of its territory to regional affiliates of Al Qaeda and the Islamic State (DSN, 2022). Unlike Mali and Niger, there is no UN or EU CSDP mission in Burkina Faso.

## 2.2 Mali

The Republic of Mali is a landlocked country located in West Africa. It is bordered by Algeria to the north, Mauritania and Senegal to the west, Guinea, and Ivory Coast to the south and Burkina Faso and Niger to the east. Its capital is Bamako, which has about 2.7 million inhabitants. The national population is approximately 21,900,000 (2021 World Bank estimate). The majority of Malians are Muslims (95 percent) and the official language of the country is French, but Bambara is spoken by a large number of people (Office of International Religious Freedom, 2022, p.2). Despite being a country rich in gold, it is one of the poorest countries in the world, ranking 186th in the HDI in 2022 (UNDP, 2022). Political instability and the weakness of the Malian state security forces have contributed to the destabilization of the country, which has gradually spread throughout its territory following the conflict between the Malian state and the Tuareg independence movements that began in 2012. In 2022, the number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) amounts to 400,000, double the number recorded in 2019,

according to the United Nations Agency for Refugees (UNHCR) (AECID, 2022, p.6). France and other EU member states are withdrawing their troops from Mali, except for those deployed in the UN mission, due to Bamako's rhetoric and its decision to bring in the Russian private security firm Wagner. Ties with most of its neighbors are at their lowest point since Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) imposed trade restrictions on Mali over the authorities' refusal to budge on the election issue (International Crisis Group, 2022).

### 2.3 Niger

Officially known as the Republic of Niger, the country is located in the northern hemisphere of the African continent, and shares borders with Algeria, Libya, Chad, Nigeria, Benin, Burkina Faso and Mali. Its population is estimated at 24 million inhabitants, with most of the population concentrated in the south, on the borders with Benin and Nigeria. Its capital Niamey (1,565,056 inhabitants) is also the largest city, and the official language is French, in addition to 10 other national languages (World Bank, 2022). The population is mostly Muslim, 98 percent, and the rest Christian and of traditional religions (Office of International Religious Freedom, 2022, p.2). Although it is a country rich in mineral resources, Niger is one of the poorest countries in the world, ranking 189 out of 192 countries in the HDI of 2022 (UNDP, 2022). In terms of the country's politics, a constitutional referendum was held in October 2010, in which a new constitution was approved, and the VII Republic was established. Then, the PNDSTarayya of Mahamadou Issoufou, won the presidential elections in 2011 and revalidated his mandate in the 2016 elections (Fuglestad & Laya, 2023). In terms of security, there is a high activity of terrorist groups in Niger, mainly Al Qaeda affiliates (JNIM), and Daesh Great Sahara. They operate mainly in the border areas with Mali and Burkina Faso and are also supported by the international community through various cooperation missions in the fields of security and defense (Saeed Al-Moghedi, 2021, p.2). According to information provided by UNHCR, the number of people in Niger who have been displaced, refugees or who have returned to their homes is estimated at over 580,000 (AECID, 2022, p.8). Niger is in a situation of vulnerability due to exposure to sudden shocks, such as floods and droughts, as well as overlapping structural crises that weaken the country's resilience in terms of food and nutrition security.

## 2.4 Common features

A common feature of these three countries in terms of international relations as of today (2023), could be the harm that this agreement is causing them the Economic Partnership Agreement with the European Union (EPA), which is a trade agreement that seeks to establish a closer and more equitable trade relationship between the European Union and African, Caribbean, and Pacific countries (Chimanikire, 2019). This agreement includes provisions on trade in goods, services and investment, as well as regulatory issues. Dr. Donald P. Chimanikire (2019) discusses the negative effects of liberalization trade policy on African countries, which has led to competition from foreign products and the disappearance of infant industries, causing high levels of unemployment and poverty. In addition, the EPA has led to the balkanization of the continent and have undermined the concept of regional integration, as there are contentious issues related to the elimination of export taxes and conflict resolution mechanisms. For Chimanikire (2019, p.51), there is a need for African governments to seek their own solutions to their problems, and not follow the EU model of development, which resembles a neo-colonialist relationship.

## 3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This section will provide definitions of the key concepts such as terrorism, jihadism, counterterrorism, and international intervention, necessary for the analysis and discussion of this paper, and which are fundamental to achieve the objectives established in the introduction. The main authors and theories that will guide the research will also be presented as well.

### 3.1 Terrorism

In the introduction, we described the Sahel as an unprotected place, where the lack of authority and multiple vulnerabilities are exploited by terrorists. Therefore, it is important to know what terrorism is, its characteristics, and the different classifications.

#### 3.1.1 Terrorism: etymological origin and definition.

The word terrorism comes from the Latin root *terrere*, which means “fear” or “terror” (Lamarca, 1985). The first people to use the term terrorism and refer to the terrorist

threat, were the Jacobins. This occurred as a response to the reign of terror of the French revolution, when people used violence, including executions, to force obedience to the state and to intimidate the enemies of the regime (Aronson, 2002).

The United Nations General Assembly adopted the Declaration on Measures to Eliminate International Terrorism in 1994, and together with the Declaration supplementing the Declaration in 1996, condemned all acts and practices of terrorism as criminal and unjustifiable, wherever and by whomever committed, and urged all States to take measures at the national and international levels to eliminate international terrorism. Subsequently, the United Nations has defined the term terrorism as “*criminal acts intended or calculated to provoke a state of terror in the general public, a group of persons or particular persons for political purposes are in any circumstance unjustifiable, whatever the considerations of a political, philosophical, ideological, racial, ethnic, religious or any other nature that may be invoked to justify them*”, emphasizing that political or related considerations could not be used to justify the perpetration of terrorist acts (United Nations General Assembly, 2019, p.4).

Various theorists have attempted to define terrorism in general terms. Brian M. Jenkins (1978) describes terrorism as the systematic use of force to incite fear and influence decision-making, and Martha Crenshaw (1987, p.13) as a “*acts to achieve collective values, which involve radical changes in political and social conditions*”. Although there are nuances, all definitions focus on the use of force or threat of force to achieve political, religious, or ideological ends. The term "terrorism" has been subject to constant change in meaning and usage over time, which has made it difficult to construct a coherent definition. However, there is a consensus that the term has a pejorative connotation and is generally applied to those with whom one disagrees or who are considered enemies or opponents (Hoffman, 1998).

The term "counterterrorism" has been used to describe the struggle against terrorism. Both the United Nations and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe strive to establish counterterrorism strategies for peacebuilding and security, and to lessen, and address terrorist threats. These strategies involve a variety of fields, including diplomacy and international cooperation, for the protection of human rights.

These steps include conventions and protocols against terrorism, mediation, increased public safety, military operations, and commitments to lower terrorists' attacks propensity and motivation (UN General Assembly, 2006; OSCE, 2012).

### 3.1.2 Characteristics of terrorism

Just as the different authors do not share an exact definition of the concept of terrorism, they disagree on the characteristics that define it. However, many of them agree on some elements, that they argue are key to learning more about this phenomenon. To assess whether the terrorist presence in the Sahel region, the characteristics established by the theorists will be explained to analyze whether they are applicable to the case study.

As the Council of Europe asserts, terrorism is a politically inspired act, with a **greater and strategic final objective**, which is normally to exert pressure on the government. That is to say that, for the Council, behind terrorism, there is a power project generally directed against institutions or organizations, which are intended to be subdued **through the use of force** (Council of Europe, 2023). What inspires terrorist acts are not exclusively political causes, and the researcher Khalil Azar also includes ideological, ethnic and religious motives (Azar, 2003, p.1).

In addition to the **violence or the threat of violence**, the acts must be designed to have a strong impact in order to provoke the maximum reaction. The impact of their attacks generates intense fear among rivals, which terrorists take advantage of to spread their demands. Finally, terrorism **involves civilians**, and many observers rule out classifying terrorist attacks that target military or state officials. Experts argue that a terrorist act carried out by a state cannot be terrorism and limit it to acts by sub-groups of the state (Council of Europe, 2023).

To distinguish terrorism from other forms of crime, certain characteristics have been identified by Bruce Hoffman (1998): *“terrorism has political objectives and motives, is violent or threatens violence, seeks to generate psychological repercussions beyond the immediate victim, is perpetrated by an organization with an identifiable chain of*

*command or a conspiratorial cellular structure, and is carried out by subnational groups or non-state entities*". These characteristics described by Hoffman (1998, p.212), demonstrate that terrorism is a form of political violence with large-scale psychological impacts and that it is differentiated from other types of crime by its political objectives and specific organization.

### 3.1.3 Classification of terrorism: causes.

Terrorism is an unjustifiable act of violence and must be condemned in all cases. It is true that terrorist groups usually justify their actions in defense of different causes. We can classify the different terrorist groups depending on these causes:

Some terrorist groups claim that they fight for **political causes**, and for the liberation of their country or their region, from political oppression or foreign occupation. Among them are **radical nationalists**. *The Victims of Terrorism Visual Glossary* defines nationalism as an expression of feelings of loyalty to a political community. For them, radical nationalists use violence to postulate some form of homogeneity and aspire to the uniformization of the social body in the name of a predefined idea of homeland (Casquete, 2021).

There are also **ethnic causes**, where terrorists defend the rights of a particular ethnic group. In addition to political and ethnic causes, we also find those terrorist groups that fight for **ideological causes**. For example, as indicated in *The Visual Glossary of the Victims of Terrorism*, extreme **left-wing terrorism** has its origin in the repeal of the right-wing capitalist system, to replace it with communist or socialist. This group of violent minority groups assumed the need to apply armed struggle to achieve their political and ideological objectives. A situation that in the framework of peaceful societies of that time could only take the form of terrorism societies (Muñoz Bolaños, 2021). Among the main groups belonging to this trend, we highlight the Red Army Faction in the German Federal Republic and the Red Brigades in Italy. On the other hand, **ultra-right terrorism** is mainly motivated by right-wing or extreme right-wing ideologies, i.e. neo-Nazism, fascism, xenophobia, homophobia and anti-feminism, among others. In addition to these characteristics, the academic for the Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies (IEEE), Román D. Ortiz (2022, p.186), adds the rejection of



groups of this nature to the values and institutions of liberal democracy. For him, political-social tensions arise when confidence in the solvency of democratic institutions to resolve conflicts is in a deep crisis (Ortíz, 2022, p.200).

### 3.2 Jihadism

Other terrorist groups use religion as a justification. In our study we will focus only on terrorism perpetuated in the name of Islam, i.e., **jihadism**. Violent armed movements, acting in the name of Islam, have become the greatest threat to the Sahel countries.

Jihadism seeks to establish an Islamic state through violence and the application of Sharia law. It is associated with a fundamentalist interpretation of Islam that promotes jihad as a legitimate means of defending and spreading the faith. In Arabic, the word **jihadism** means "striving" or "struggle." Since the 1990s, the term jihadism has been used to refer to radical Islamic movements. As the BBC puts it, jihadists believe that violent struggle is necessary to eradicate the obstacles to restoring God's reign on Earth and to defend the Muslim community against infidels. Jihad is not only a collective obligation, but an individual duty that every Muslim must fulfill, just like fasting during Ramadan (BBC, 2014).

Jihadism has been addressed by several leading theorists, including Gilles Kepel and Fernando Pinto Cebrián (2023). Kepel (2006) sees jihadism as a response to the contemporary Islamic crisis and the lack of political solutions to the problems of the Muslim world. Pinto Cebrián (2023) adds that, in the Sahel, jihadists try to impose their fanatical vision of Islam to the predominant Sunni Muslim population that is subject to political, economic, and social instability, where in addition to corrupt governments, there is a civil society very divided by ethnic, religious, or governmental ideas (Pinto Cebrián, 2023). Theories of jihad include the humiliation theory, which sees jihad as a response to the humiliation and oppression suffered by Muslims in Western countries and their allies in the Muslim world (Lindner, 2003). In addition, the political failure theory holds that jihadism is a response to the failure of Muslim governments to provide basic services and economic opportunities to their citizens (Paarlberg & Zuhlke, 2019). Finally, radicalization theory asserts that jihadism is a process of gradual radicalization that begins with the adoption of fundamentalist ideologies and ends with the

justification of violence and terrorism as legitimate means to achieve political and religious goals (Maskaliunaite, 2015).

### 3.3 Colonialism

The difficulty of defining colonialism stems from the fact that the term is often used as a synonym for imperialism. In this paper we refer to the term colonialism as a broad concept, that refers to the project, mainly European, of political domination that began in the early XVI century (Kohn & Reddy, 2023). Classical colonialism can also be defined as a form of control over the territory and/or behavior of other individuals and groups (Horvath, 1972). It is convenient to refer to this concept because the three countries analyzed in this paper suffered forms of colonialism in their territories during the 19th and 20th centuries. Reminiscences of this form of government can be found in post-colonial societies and contribute in large part to the outbreak of violence. However, it could be argued that the term neocolonialism better explains the set of events are taking place in the Sahelian countries. Neocolonialism, unlike colonialism, is characterized by indirect control through the exploitation and trade of natural resources and cultural influence. In these cases, the neocolonized countries are not physically occupied by forces of the dominant country, but by a policy planned by advanced countries to maintain their influence in the developing countries (Macías Chávez, 2015). There is a generalization in which the decolonization and the later neocolonization, consisted of the choice of a local elite, usually an ethnic group, as the partner of the former colonizing power, excluding the others from the political and economic partition. This discriminatory gamble has only emphasized ethnic differences, used as a tool to serve the shared interests of these small elites and their external partners, all of whom are interested in enforcing the old principle of divide and conquer. In this situation, it seems convenient for any local ruler to count on international support to improve his possibilities of maintaining an adequate level of control over his society and his external enemies (Núñez Villaverde et al., 2009).

### 3.4 International Intervention

The continuity of international interventions over time has made it a constantly debated issue. Several theorists have studied international intervention in terrorist-infected

conflict zones. Arguably, intervention should have in mind the promotion of democracy, peace, and security (Von Soest, 2018). However, the fact that this has not always been successful, combined with the widespread respect for national sovereignty, has influenced the decision of foreign powers to intervene. It is argued that prominent military interventions lack legitimacy and have detrimental effects, as in the case of Afghanistan, Libya, and Iraq. Indeed, international interventions have sometimes been seen as an instrument for the powerful to gain influence or control over the weak, perpetuating an image of domination and exporting their cultural tendencies (liberal democracy and capitalism) (Dunn, 2013).

## 4. METHODOLOGY

### 4.1 Objectives and hypotheses

With the study of the Sahel, and the jihadist activity in the area, it is feasible to obtain results that show that this trend is increasing in the different countries studied. The objective of this research focuses, therefore, on observing terrorist activity in the different countries of the region and analyzing how they have used different resources to continue perpetuating crimes.

Focusing on the Sahel region, the aim of the research is to observe the extent of jihadism in the countries and the consequences of terrorist acts. To obtain satisfactory results, not only the countries of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger will be analyzed, but also the factors that facilitate the presence of terrorist groups in the region will be taken into account.

To this end, different research questions have been used as a starting point:

- In the 21st century, has there been an increase in violent extremism in the Sahel?
- What are the reasons for jihadists to establish themselves in the region?
- Has the intervention of other countries had positive results?

Thus, several hypotheses have been put forward:

- Jihadist presence in the Sahel is increasing.
- In order to carry out its activity, the main factor exploited by jihadists are unstable governments and the social frustration among the Muslim population.

- Neocolonialism and the current international presence in the region have both negative and positive consequences.

## 4.2 Methods

To fulfill the objectives of this thesis, mentioned above, it is necessary to divide the analysis and discussions into several sections. It must be an analysis supported by direct, non-superficial and constantly updated knowledge about those territories, their cultures, traditions, religions, etc., and employing qualitative and quantitative techniques.

First, we will analyze the importance of Islam, the impact of colonialism and other cultural matters. This is of importance to understand the factors that facilitated the settlement of terrorists, and the context in which it occurs. The aim is to understand the factors that accompany this violent extremism, to understand how it works, and to gain an in-depth understanding of the social, political, and economic context in the Sahel.

Once the basis of our analysis has been established, and a better understanding of the region has been obtained, a comparative analysis will be made between in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger, using several sources like the Africa Center for Strategic Studies and data from the United Nations. We will analyze the evolution of terrorist attacks and activity, as well as the international presence and the humanitarian crisis in the countries. The objective is to establish the impact of jihadism in each nation. In addition, the other key issues mentioned in the theoretical framework will be considered and compared in relation to the cases, drawing out the similarities and differences between the countries, and highlighting the importance of security and counterterrorism.

Finally, a series of conclusions will be drawn from this analysis. This final section will also provide an assessment of this research work, highlighting the difficulties that may have been encountered during the development of this research and how they have been overcome. Finally, the contributions of this research work to its field will be highlighted and possible lines of future research in this area will be presented.

## 5. ANALYSIS

### 5.1 The Sahel region

The term Sahel comes from *sahil*, which means “coast” or “edge” in Arabic. It comprises an area of about 4 million kilometers, which have been an important strategic region through which crossed the trade routes connecting the Gulf of Guinea with North Africa, and the Atlantic lands with the interior, enabling the exchange of goods and cultures (New Atlatis Documentaries, 2014). Today, these same routes are used for smuggling and other illicit activities.

The origins of the Sahel date back to the ancient history of Africa, when the first human beings began to migrate southward from the continent. Over time, Sahelian tribes settled, adapting to its climate and natural resources (New Atlatis Documentaries, 2014). Before European colonization, the inhabitants of the Sahel followed an essentially nomadic life, centered on the movement of livestock from north to south.

This changed to a more sedentary life, due to a concern for national borders between the different countries in the area, displacing the traditional considerations about the boundaries that ethnic and tribal differences had long followed, towards others that were strictly political and linked to the interests of the dominant elites in each new state. Colonization entailed a process of fragmentation and forced union, which did not improve coexistence but, on the contrary, further exacerbated the differences and confrontations between different ethnic groups, tribes, or beliefs (Núñez Villaverde et al., 2009).

In this paper, when the term Sahel is used, it will refer to the **G5 countries**, which as described by the Interpol, is a regional intergovernmental organization that was founded in 2014 to provide an institutional framework for the promotion of development and security of the member countries, which are **Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger**, by collecting and processing relevant criminal information jointly, and structured around military and police components (Interpol, 2020). Once the geographical area of the study has been defined, it is appropriate to explore the origins of this African region, and to identify the various key points that have defined, and continue to define, its geopolitics.

In terms of religion, the tribes of the Sahel have practiced various religions throughout history. Before the arrival of Islam in the 7th century, the tribes of the Sahel practiced monotheistic religions, that included the worship of nature spirits and ancestors (New Atlantins Documentaries, 2014). During the 18th century, Islam began to establish itself in the Sahel countries, measured both in terms of the volume of new converts and in terms of its presence and prominence, or purely military campaigns for expansion and control of new territories. As for the religious causes, it is worth remembering that the spread of Islam in the Sahel was not the result of an immediate conquest, but rather that this religion expanded through a gradual and multifaceted process. It is estimated that by the end of the 11th century, most of the inhabitants of the Sahel had already adopted Islam as their main religious identity; however, there are indications that on a less political and less formal level, a significant part of the Sahelians continued to maintain their own local beliefs (Núñez Villaverde et al., 2009).

There are still some groups that practice animist religions, as well as some that have adopted Christianity or Judaism. However, today, all the countries of the Sahel are largely **Muslim**. This fact has been both a unifying element and a conflictive factor, since it facilitated the unification of a large part of the African continent and, at the same time, provoked new conflicts based on the different interpretations of the version of the faith, that each group intended to defend as the true one and impose on the others. This is an element that cannot be circumscribed to the history of the Sahel, but rather to that of Islam as a whole, punctuated by frequent clashes not only theological but violent. The French colonizers were no strangers to these dynamics of religious confrontation and tried to use them to their advantage. Thus, they tried to manipulate the tensions between the different Muslim groups to dilute the obstacle that a unified Islam could represent to their colonial domination (Núñez Villaverde et al., 2009).

The fundamentalist movement, which aims to return to the original roots of Islam, promotes a very strict version in all areas of individual and collective life. Although in principle it clashes with the aforementioned religious tolerance characteristic of the Sahel, its growing appeal can be identified with its striking egalitarian message for all the servants there. It is important to understand that participation in such movements is

often explained with the radicalization and humiliation theory, or as a response to the failure of the corrupt and underdeveloped societies in which Muslims themselves live. So, fundamentalism offered a positive and modern solution to people who were geographically and socially flexible. Since 1992, fundamentalists reached a particularly important position in Mali, favored by the return of immigrants from France. Their missions subsequently expanded to the city of the Tuaregs where the rebellions of the 1960s and 1990s took place. For them, the non-Islamic world, especially that of the West in its globalized form, is considered a model of the current decadence, and in practice, it is these heretical Muslims to whom their anger is primarily directed (Núñez Villaverde et al., 2009).

Moving forward, as Fernando Pinto Cebrián (2023) points out, the Sahel is known as a place of tribal movements, where violent clashes between natives and nomads have long coexisted, and continue today with members of organized crime, traffickers of all kinds, and jihadist terrorist groups. For the author, the region is made up of **weak governments** and very divided societies, in addition to desertification, which causes famine and population displacement. The large territorial extension of the countries means that many areas escape the control of the State, generally characterized by the weakness of its institutions. In addition, population growth and an extremely young population with no life expectancy have led to an increase in threats and instability.

All Sahelian nations in their current national state configuration are very young and to a large extent, this explains the lack of maturity in their political systems, which have often suffered convulsive periods resulting from internal conflicts. The populations are concentrated in the capitals of the nations and very specific cities as most of these territories are practically empty and are subject to sporadic and reactive control. All the governments in the Sahel are constitutional republics, where coups d'état have occurred over the last decades, and which have subsequently been restored to democratic systems (Instituto Español de Estudios Estratégicos, 2015, p.16).

## 5.2 Colonialism in the Sahel

Knowing about the presence and influence of colonialism in the region is important for our analysis because of the great impact it has had on the population. As mentioned in the New Atlantis documentary, throughout history, the Sahel has been home to several important empires and kingdoms, including the Empire of Ghana, the Empire of Mali, and the Songhai Empire, which controlled large areas of West Africa. The narrators discuss how these empires grew rich from trans-Saharan trade, and left an architectural, artistic, and cultural legacy in the region (New Atlantins Documentaries, 2014).

Researcher Silvester Trnovec describes in his article *The challenges of Colonial Rule in West African Sahel - The Case of French West Africa 1900 - 1930*, how the French began to conquer the kingdoms and states that controlled the Sahel in the second half of the 19th century, such as the Empire of Mali and the Kingdom of Sokoto, during the process of European colonization of Africa. Trnovec mentions that, during this period, France established several colonies and protectorates in the region, including Mauritania, Senegal, Mali, Niger, Chad and Burkina Faso, which they integrated into French West Africa and French Equatorial Africa (Silvester Trnovec, 2020, p.290).

Trnovec (2020) relates that, between 1850 and 1910, France acquired the Western Sahel through a **violent and brutal colonization process**. He tells how the French imposed their political, economic, and cultural system on the region, which led to the marginalization and exploitation of the local populations. In the article, he mentions that political and economic instability, as well as some threats linked to the environmental conditions, were already major issues for the French colonial administration in the first decades of the 20th century.

In addition, the reformist Islamic movement that spread across the western Sahel and the West African savannah had a significant impact on the French colonial conquest. In his view, Islam was a powerful force in state building and mobilization against French colonialism, led by various African Muslim leaders who called for jihad against the European conquerors and their allies. He stresses that these wars left a permanent mark



on the historical memory of local populations and French colonial administrators (Silvester Trnovec, 2020).

### 5.3 Jihadist Terrorist in the Sahel

The trigger for the emergence of jihadism in the Sahel was the entry into northern Mali of the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC), which was fleeing from the military prison of the Algerian security forces. In 2003 the kidnapping of 32 European tourists in the Algerian desert, and their subsequent transfer to Malian territory, where they were released in exchange for a million-millionaire ransom, was the first terrorist act in the Sahel. Since then, jihadist groups have multiplied and, with them, their attacks, assaults, and kidnappings throughout the region (Núñez Villaverde et al., 2009). Years later, the fall of the Gaddafi regime in 2011 and the plundering of its weapons arsenals, together with internal struggles for leadership within AQIM, led to the split of the jihadist network. This led to the founding of the Tuareg and Ansar Dine extremist groups and the movement for the unity of Jihad in West Africa (Instituto Español de Estudios Estratégicos, 2015, p.26).

#### 5.3.1 Terrorist groups in the Sahel.

Jihadist groups are causing instability and violence in the region, and both governments and citizens are struggling to respond to the threat. The main terrorist groups operating in the Sahel to establish an Islamic State are the following:

- The most active terrorist group operating in the Sahel is **Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)**. AQIM originated from the Armed Islamic Group (GIA), which was a militant group that emerged in the 1990s during the Algerian Civil War. Some members of the GIA split off to form the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC).

In 2007, after pledging allegiance to Bin Laden, the GSPC renamed itself Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and established its main sanctuary in northern Mali. Al Qaeda is a radical Sunni Muslim organization, founded by Osama bin Laden in 1988, dedicated to the elimination of a Western presence in

Arab countries and militantly opposed to Western foreign policy (National Counterterrorism Center, 2023). AQIM's primary objective is to establish an Islamic state in the Maghreb region, which includes Algeria, Tunisia, Morocco, and Mauritania. The group seeks to achieve this goal through violent means, including bombings, kidnappings, and other attacks. AQIM has also been involved in drug trafficking and other criminal activities to fund its operations (Echeverría Jesús, 2013, p.2).

The group has faced significant pressure from regional governments and international forces, including French and United Nations forces, which have been deployed to combat its activities in the region. Despite these efforts, AQIM remains active and continues to pose a significant security threat to the Maghreb region and beyond (Navarrete Paniagua, 2010).

- **The Islamic State (IS)** seeks to establish an Islamic caliphate across the region and has been linked to the kidnappings of westerners in the region. **Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS)** is a branch of the Islamic State that operates in the Sahel region. The group has been active since 2015 and has been responsible for several attacks and for the deaths of hundreds of civilians and military personnel in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger. At times, ISGS has operated closely, and possibly even cooperatively, with JNIM fighters (ECFR, 2019).

The independent Salafi-jihadist organization emerged in 2015 as an offshoot of another militant group called Al-Mourabitoun, which was founded by Mokhtar Belmokhtar, a notorious Algerian jihadist. ISGS was initially made up of fighters from Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger who had previously been affiliated with Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) or other militant groups in the region like the MUJAO. The group has also benefitted from the proliferation of weapons and fighters across the region, particularly in the wake of the Libyan Civil War (Thompson, 2021).

- While primarily based in Nigeria, **Boko Haram** has also carried out attacks in neighboring countries, including Chad and Niger. The Islamic sect was founded in 2002 and the group's official name is Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad, which in Arabic means "People Committed to the Propagation of the Prophet's Teachings and Jihad". believes politics in northern Nigeria has been seized by a group of corrupt, false Muslims. It wants to wage a war against them, and the Federal Republic of Nigeria generally, to create a "pure" Islamic state ruled by sharia law (Walker, 2012).

The group gained notoriety in 2009 when it launched a series of attacks on police stations, government buildings, and other targets in Northeast Nigeria, which led to a crackdown by the Nigerian government. The ensuing conflict has led to the displacement of millions of people and caused widespread human suffering. The group's activities in the Sahel have been largely focused on bombing and extortion (Walker, 2012).

- **Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM)** is an alliance of several jihadist groups in the Sahel, including AQIM and Ansar Dine. Ansar Dine is an Islamist militant group that emerged in Mali in 2012. The group's name means "Defenders of the Faith" in Arabic, and its primary goal is to establish sharia law in Mali and other parts of West Africa (Echeverría Jesús, 2013, p.14).

Ansar Dine was founded by Iyad Ag Ghaly, a Tuareg rebel and former leader of another armed group, who had previously fought for the Malian government but later turned against it. In 2012, Ansar Dine played a significant role in the takeover of northern Mali, where the group imposed its strict interpretation of sharia law and destroyed ancient shrines and manuscripts that it deemed to be idolatrous. Ansar Dine and its affiliates have continued to operate in Mali and the wider Sahel region, and the group has been responsible for several high-profile attacks in Mali and Burkina Faso (Europa Press, 2022).

- The Sahel region was also home to the **Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO)**. The MUJAO was an Islamist militant group that operated in

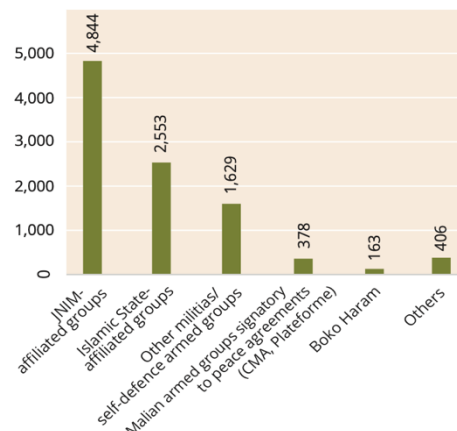
the Sahel region of West Africa from 2011 to 2013. In 2013, a coalition of West African states, led by France, intervened militarily in Mali and succeeded in driving MUJAO and other Islamist groups out of the northern part of the country. Since then, MUJAO has been largely inactive, although its former members are believed to have joined other militant groups operating in the region (Echeverría Jesús, 2013, p.13).

These terrorist groups pose a significant threat to stability and security in the Sahel region and have led to the displacement of millions of people. In addition to dead, wounded and displaced people, confidence in the countries' ability to govern and to support healthy economies is being eroded.

As Muhammad Dan Suleiman points out, jihadist coalitions, such as EIGS and JNIM, are becoming increasingly important, and Islamist militant groups are consolidating their presence, testing national borders and numerous counterterrorism measures. Similarly, he proposes that it should be kept in mind that Islamist militant actors are distinct in relation to the type of presence, their modus operandi, their motivations, and the balance of power between them and others (Muhammad Dan Suleiman, 2022). He states that multilateral cooperation to curb terrorism is of crucial importance, especially through intergovernmental organizations such as the United Nations, the African Union and ECOWAS. Even so, he considers that the actors must recognize the different political compositions and not impose a universal logic for local contexts (Muhammad Dan Suleiman, 2022).

According to the Africa Center for Strategic Studies (2023), fatalities in the Sahel involving militant Islamist groups are increasing, resulting in 7,560 just in 2022 (75 percent) of the total 9,973 fatalities associated with non-state armed groups in the region. As for the Islamic terrorist groups that perpetrate these deaths, Table 2 shows how the JNIM coalition, especially the Macina Liberation Front (FLM), Ansaroul Islam, and Ansar Dine, were linked to approximately 64 percent of the militant Islamist violence, and 67 percent of the related fatalities in the Sahel. The Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) and Boko Haram are linked to the remaining violent events (27 percent). Just 24 percent of these fatalities are associated with non-Islamic groups.

Table 2. Fatalities associated with non-state armed groups in the Sahel countries, January-November 2022. (UNODC, 2022).<sup>2</sup>



Source: ACLED data for Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and the Niger between 1 January and 30 November 2022.

### 5.3.2. The death of Muamar Gaddafi

The increase in terrorism in the Sahel cannot be directly attributed to the death of Muammar Gaddafi, but it is widely acknowledged that his overthrow and the subsequent destabilization of Libya has had a significant impact on the security situation in the region.

Before his death in 2011, Gaddafi had played a significant role in promoting stability in the Sahel region. Libya's foreign policy under Gaddafi included significant economic and financial investments in West African and Sahelian states. He also had close ties to several tribal and ethnic groups in the region, which helped to mitigate conflicts and prevent the growth of extremist groups. Although Libya was suspected of supporting rebels, Gaddafi helped broker a peace agreement between the Tuareg rebels and the governments of Niger and Mali in 2009 (Oladimeji, 2022, p.121).

However, following Gaddafi's overthrow, Libya descended into chaos, with various militias vying for power and control over the country's resources. This created a power vacuum that allowed terrorist groups to establish a foothold in the country and use it as a base for attacks in the Sahel. Furthermore, the death of Gaddafi caused many Tuareg

<sup>2</sup> Source: *Firearms Trafficking in the Sahel: Transnational Organized Crime Threat Assessment*. United Nations: Office on Drugs and Crime. p.12. Retrieved April 15 from [https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/data-and-analysis/Tocta\\_Sahel.html](https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/data-and-analysis/Tocta_Sahel.html).

to become middlemen in the illegal firearms trafficking across the Sahara to West African states, which led to the illegal movement of small and light weapons across the Sahara, ending up in the hands of various terror groups like Boko Haram, AQIM, and Tuareg rebels (Steinberg and Weber, 2015, p.35).

The United Nations Security Council issued a report on the Libyan crisis in the Sahel region, where the governments of these countries have had to cope with the massive influx of traumatized and stripped returnees and the clandestine entry of a large number of firearms and ammunition from Libyan stocks. Despite measures taken to control the borders, these weapons have been smuggled into the region, including machine guns, rifles, ammunition, grenades, explosives, and light anti-aircraft artillery pieces. There is concern about the possible trafficking of these weapons to terrorist groups and their potential to aggravate the already precarious situation in these countries. According to some officials, these weapons could have been brought into the region by ex-combatant returnees, regular soldiers, mercenaries, or terrorist groups during the conflict (Comisión General de Justicia y Paz, Área de Justicia y Solidaridad de CONFER, y Red África-Europa Fe, 2014, p. 30-31). Overall, while the increase in terrorism in the Sahel cannot be solely attributed to the death of Muammar Gaddafi, his overthrow and the subsequent destabilization of Libya have undoubtedly had a significant impact on the security situation in the region.

### 5.3.3 The Azawad and the Tuareg

The increase in terrorist activity cannot be explained by a single phenomenon, as there are many reasons for the increase in jihadist activity in the region. We can also mention the situation in the Azawad, which has facilitated the presence of radical extremists in the Sahel.

Azawad is a region in northern Mali that has been the center of a long-standing separatist conflict involving the Tuareg people. The Tuareg are a Berber ethnic group that traditionally inhabits the Sahara Desert, with a long history of nomadic herding and their own language, the Tamasheq. The Tuareg have long sought greater autonomy and recognition of their cultural and political rights and have engaged in several armed uprisings against the Malian government since the country gained independence from

France in 1960. In recent years, some Tuareg have become involved in jihadist groups in the Sahel region, including AQIM, MUJAO and Ansar Dine (Moraleda Martín Peñato, 2013, p.5).

Tuareg participation in jihadist groups is a complex issue driven by a sense of marginalization and discrimination in their home countries. Many Tuareg have a history of conflict with national governments over issues such as land rights, political representation, and economic development, and feel that their interests have been neglected or ignored. Although some Tuaregs have turned to jihadist groups as a means of vindicating their grievances and seeking greater autonomy, not all support these groups. Moreover, these groups include fighters of other ethnicities and nationalities, and their motivations and objectives are often more complex than those based simply on ethnic or cultural identity (Center for Preventive Action, 2022).

In 2012, a coalition of Tuareg separatist groups, including the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA), launched a new rebellion in northern Mali, taking advantage of the chaos and instability that followed the overthrow of Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi in 2011. However, the MNLA was soon pushed aside by jihadist groups, including AQIM and Ansar Dine, who took advantage of the power vacuum to gain control of the region. The jihadist groups imposed a strict form of Islamic law in the areas under their control, including banning music, smoking, and other forms of entertainment, and carrying out public executions and amputations. They also targeted civilians, particularly those who were perceived to be supporters of the Malian government or opposed to their radical ideology (Moraleda Martín Peñato, 2013, p.9).

#### 5.4 Counterterrorism in the Sahel

There is talk of a "wave" in question to the military initiatives against terrorism in the Sahel, where the countries of the region and their European partners have generated a mosaic of counterterrorism (D'Amato, Baldaro, 2022). The international community has been working to support efforts by Sahelian governments to combat these groups, including through military and intelligence cooperation, as well as development assistance to address the underlying social and economic grievances that contribute to their growth.

#### 5.4.1 Counterterrorism efforts

Several regional organizations are trying to find sustainable solutions for the Western Sahel by combining security and development. These efforts include:

**International assistance:** The countries of the region, with the support of the international community, have carried out several military operations to combat jihadist groups. Over the past ten years, several international actors have deployed over 21,000 forces to the Sahel to address the critical situation. These include the UN, with the stabilization mission in Mali (MINUSMA), France through Operation Serval and the European Task Force Takuba, the European Union with its military and civilian training missions, as well as the United States and other Western countries aiding local security forces. The reasons for deployment vary, ranging from reducing refugee flows and terrorist activities, to improving local forces and promoting multilateralism (Wilén and Williams, 2022).

The UN has identified terrorism as a priority in its security agenda and launched the UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy as early as 2006. Initially, MINUSMA's task was to protect the population in the cities, but, as of resolution 2164 of 2014, the protection of the population was extended to the whole territory, which implies greater exposure (Instituto Español de Estudios Estratégicos, 2015, p.52). The international organization has a presence in the region focused on institutional support, peacekeeping on the African continent and development cooperation, which can play an important role in finding long-term solutions to the causes and symptoms of terrorism. In diplomatic terms, the UN has been involved in the search for peaceful solutions to the conflicts between the Tuaregs and local governments, especially in Mali and Niger, and has a permanent presence in the Sahel (Núñez Villaverde et al., 2009).

The U.S. tries to influence all countries in the Sahel strip. The United States is trying to develop a dual agenda of building the capacity of national security forces and creating informal links with local groups. The U.S. discourse intends for the Sahel to be seen as a new front in the war on terror. In addition to controlling the hotbed of instability and terrorism, Washington wants to ensure its control and its growing importance as a source of energy supply, coveted by different external actors. Considering that the Sahel



is one of the few regions that still has no international owner, the US interest in accelerating its disembarkation in the area becomes even more evident.

China, for its part, is much more interested in guaranteeing the supply of vital raw materials to maintain its rapid pace of economic growth without dwelling on considerations of international legality, the defense of human rights, or geopolitical order. Islamism and its action in the region is focused on strengthening Sunni groups through financial support for their activities (Núñez Villaverde et al., 2009). China extends its trade to Africa, and therefore its influence, by building infrastructures and buying land. It is the most important actor in terms of investment volume among the emerging countries.

**Regional cooperation:** Sahel countries have strengthened their regional cooperation in the fight against jihadist terrorism. In 2014, the G5 Sahel Joint Force was created, a regional initiative that seeks to improve coordination among Sahel countries in the fight against jihadist terrorism. In July 2017, with the continued backing and impetus of France, G5 Sahel announced the creation of a joint force (G-5 Sahel Joint Force) which, with some 5,000 troops when it reaches full operational capability, is tasked with protecting border areas and supporting both the French Barkhane force and the MINUSMA (DSN, 2020).

**Economic and social development:** On the political level, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) stands out, while the G5 Sahel focuses on eradicating violence and increasing development (DSN, 2022). The G5 Sahel countries face numerous challenges, including chronic insecurity, lack of economic prospects and poor access to education, employment, and essential services such as water and electricity. Climate change is further weakening the region and is another factor contributing to the emergence of jihadist terrorism. They have therefore implemented policies to improve the economic and social situation in the region, such as rural development programs, infrastructure projects and education. In addition, development partners and major international organizations provided the answer to this dual challenge of security and development. In July 2017, France, Germany and the European Union announced the launch of the Sahel Alliance. They were joined by the World Bank, the African Development Bank, the United Nations Development

Program, Italy, Spain, the United Kingdom, Luxembourg, Denmark, the Netherlands, the European Investment Bank, Norway, Sweden, the United States and Canada. By 2021, the Sahel Alliance will support nearly 1,200 projects for a total amount of 26.5 billion euros (The Sahel Alliance, 2023).

Although efforts have been made to address underlying grievances, the region remains unstable and prone to violence. Jihadist groups continue to operate in the region and neighboring countries, taking advantage of porous borders, rugged terrain, and weak governance (Center for Preventive Action, 2022). Fernando Pinto Cebrián refers to the issue of the "powder keg of Europe", as this unstable region causes fear due to the expansion towards the north and other parts of the African continent. He admits that Western forces are there out of fear of worsening threats, and out of a desire to strengthen the security of the countries, as well as to support political change. Therefore, armed intervention in the Sahel has been chosen, rather than reconciliation in the region through security development. He deduces that the solution is not to hastily withdraw military forces, as this would make it easier for the jihadists and for forces such as the Russian or Chinese to establish themselves in the region. He believes that this is an incorrect view of the complexity of the problems to be solved, as well as of the operational errors affecting unarmed civilians. Finally, he asserts that the countries intervening in the region try to protect their economic and colonial interests without understanding the traditions, cultures, and religions of the region, imposing the idea of democracy (Pinto Cebrián, 2023).

#### 5.4.2 Obstacles to effective counterterrorism

Scholars raise several points of tension between politics and counterterrorism in the Sahel, which hinders counterterrorism efforts in the area. To begin with, Silvia D'Amato and Edoardo Baldaro (2022) mention that the **diplomatic deterioration** between Mali and France has ended their military collaboration, when the Malian authorities put an end to the Defense Cooperation Treaty between the two countries. Moreover, for them, there is an **upsurge of anti-European sentiments**, with protests against the presence of the French throughout the region.

They believe that tensions between the armed forces and civilians remain a central political issue in the Sahel, considering that there are official accounts and reports of **abuse, misconduct, and violence by military officers** against civilians in Mali, as well as in neighboring Burkina Faso and Chad. From their point of view, violence against the population is a serious problem of respect for human rights and stability. Jihadist insurgencies, they say, are spreading into Togo, Benin and Côte d'Ivoire, where millions of civilians are paying the price for the growing violence. They also emphasize that this violence and massacres do not help to combat terrorism, but rather increase the support and recruitment capacity of terrorists. The author Ignacio Fuente Cobo supports this theory and comments on how jihadist groups would have known how to take advantage of **local grievances and weak governance** (using a rhetoric based on anti-colonialism), to stir up local sentiments, presenting themselves as indispensable actors to expel foreign forces (Fuente, Cobo, 2022).

From a skeptical point of view, it can be argued that the idea behind the counter-terrorist policy in the Sahel is to create a dynamic that hides the intention to develop other activities and to defend other interests, all under the slogan of war on terror. In addition to these structural causes, we also have social causes. For example, since independence, which for many African countries took place in the early 1960s, life for a large part of the African population has been almost exclusively a difficult struggle for survival, faced with a harsh reality inherited from decades of European colonialism, and with rulers who are scarcely sensitive to their own needs. The institutional and economic infrastructure of the new states after independence, especially from the French, weakened after years of dependence and exploitation at the service of the Parisian metropolis, was the first that needed to be reinforced (Núñez Villaverde et al., 2009).

### 5.5 Comparative study: Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger.

The Sahel region harbors multiple threats, which are most active in the states of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger. The populist rhetoric, the displays of weak state authority, and the firearms trafficking are some of the factors enabling the jihadist presence in these three countries, causing humanitarian crises and instability (Raleigh, Nsaibia and Dowd, 2020).

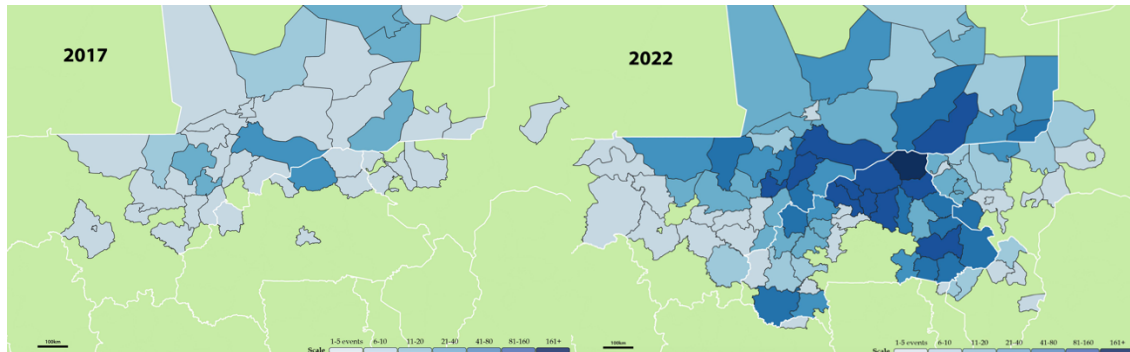
Jihadist groups and local militias are evolving in new environments and have formed complex alliances. However, violence in the region is not always caused by the global jihadist threat, but by local, ethnic, and domestic tensions. In these countries, government responses are not consistently targeting regional or local threats, allowing jihadist groups to take advantage of political disorder and generate lasting instability. Below, we will explore the current situation in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger, some of the factors that facilitate jihadist presence in these three countries, as well as the consequences that the presence of international actors bring to the countries.

#### 5.5.1 Terrorist activity and fatalities

The countries of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger have long been an area of concern for the international community due to increased terrorist activity. They have witnessed an alarming number of terrorist attacks in recent years, leading to the deaths of thousands of innocent people, and displacing many more from their homes. It is important to know the number of terrorist attacks and fatalities in these three countries, to understand the magnitude of the problem, and to be able to work on effective solutions to protect local populations and restore peace and stability in the region.

Of the 135 administrative districts in Mali, Burkina Faso, and western Niger, 84 districts, experienced violent extremist attacks in 2022. In 2017, this figure was 40 districts. This violence against civilians, is aimed at controlling revenues from gold and trafficking networks, reflecting the increasingly criminal nature of militant group activity in several of these zones (Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2022).

Table 3. Zones of Militant Islamist Violence in the Sahel 2017-2022. (The Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2022).<sup>3</sup>



The difference in jihadist activity in just 5 years is worrying. As can be seen in Table 3, activity is concentrated in specific areas of the Sahel. The situation in the area known as the "triple border" between Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger, called Liptako-Gourma, has been particularly worrying due to an increase in the number of terrorist attacks. More than one-third of the civilians killed during 2022 by militant Islamist groups in the Sahel, lived in this area (The Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2022).

We can also emphasize that in the northern area of Burkina Faso, has experienced one of the most rapid escalations of violence in the Sahel, has been the country most affected by attacks in the last two years by both JNIM and EIGS. With nearly a third (30.8 percent) of the 1,029 attacks recorded in 2021, according to ECOWAS, the State has lost control over 40 percent of its sovereign territory (DSN, 2022).

Mali, for its part, has also become a hotbed of extremist violence, which is of particular concern given the region's strategic importance in Mali's gold production. Central Mali has been the stronghold of FLM since 2015. Overall, violent events in this zone represent 14 percent of all such episodes in the Sahel and 40 percent of all the incidents in Mali (The Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2022).

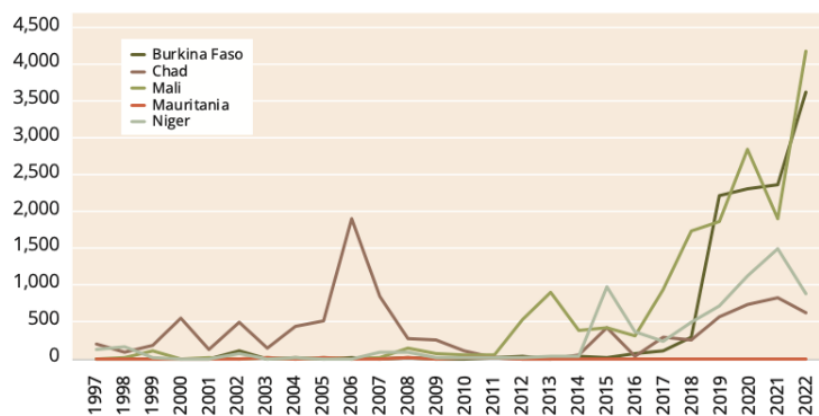
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<sup>3</sup> Source: Africa Center for Strategic Studies. (2022). *Five zones of militant Islamist violence in the Sahel*. Africa Center for Strategic Studies. Retrieved April 15, 2023, from <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/five-zones-militant-islamist-violence-sahel/>.

While 90 percent of all violent events in the Sahel occurred in Burkina Faso and Mali, there was also a significant increase in violent episodes in the littoral states. Exposed borders remain the key vulnerability for Niger and the littoral states, given the intensifying levels of attacks across their borders. While militant violence in Niger represents less than 10 percent of the total faced across the region, Niger is threatened by the surge in violent activity. ISGS has been the primary militant group attempting to exploit Niger’s borders with Mali and Burkina Faso to expand its influence over remote communities. The 174 violent events projected in Western Niger in 2022 represented a nearly 10-percent increase from the previous year (The Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2022).

Overall, Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger experienced the largest escalation in violent events in the last years, with 2,737 events related to Islamist militants, and comprise over half (55 percent) of all violent events in the region (Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2022).

Table 4. Number of fatalities in the Sahel countries, 1997-2022. (UNODC, 2022).<sup>4</sup>



Source: Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) for Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and the Niger between 1 January 1997 and 17 November 2022.

Regarding the victims as we can see in Table 4, the number of fatalities from 1997 to 2011, varied between 100 to 200 people per year in the three countries. In 2011, which coincides with the fall of Gaddafi, when we see the peak of deaths in Mali, where the numbers climb until 2013 where 1,000 deaths were recorded. If we look at Niger, the

<sup>4</sup> Source: *Firearms Trafficking in the Sahel: Transnational Organized Crime Threat Assessment*. United Nations: Office on Drugs and Crime. p.9. Retrieved April 15, 2023, from [https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/data-and-analysis/Tocta\\_Sahel.html](https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/data-and-analysis/Tocta_Sahel.html).

numbers were not too worrying until 2014-2015, when the country equaled Mali in the number of victims. This date coincides with the increase of attacks by the Boko Haram group in Nigeria, and the continuous kidnappings of civilians, which have continued to this day. Since 2016-2017, a clear increase, very significant, of deaths is seen in all three countries. Burkina Faso stands out, which had remained relatively stable until 2018 (UNODC, 2022) (Raleigh, Nsaibia and Dowd, 2020).

In 2020, the Sahel experienced an increase in casualties. This coincided with the takeover by a military junta in Mali in August 2020. Although it seemed that deaths would decrease in 2022, we saw a record number of fatalities in the country. Burkina Faso has also seen an escalation of violence, with a 69 percent growth in deaths in 2022, following a military coup in January of the same year. The three countries, with Chad and Mauritania, account for 60 percent of all civilian fatalities related to violent extremism in Africa. The only "good" news is that the situation in Niger seems to be improving, and last year the casualties were below 1,000 (Shurkin, 2022).

#### 5.5.2 Firearms trafficking

In the countries of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger, various factors have combined to create a situation of instability and violence. The Sahel region, where these countries are located, has been affected by soil degradation, leading to the loss of crops and natural resources, and increasing poverty. In addition, human and firearms trafficking, and the proliferation of armed groups have been fueled by conflicts in neighboring countries, exacerbating insecurity in the region. Individuals are vulnerable to extremist groups seeking to seize their weapons and hinder future collaboration with the government.

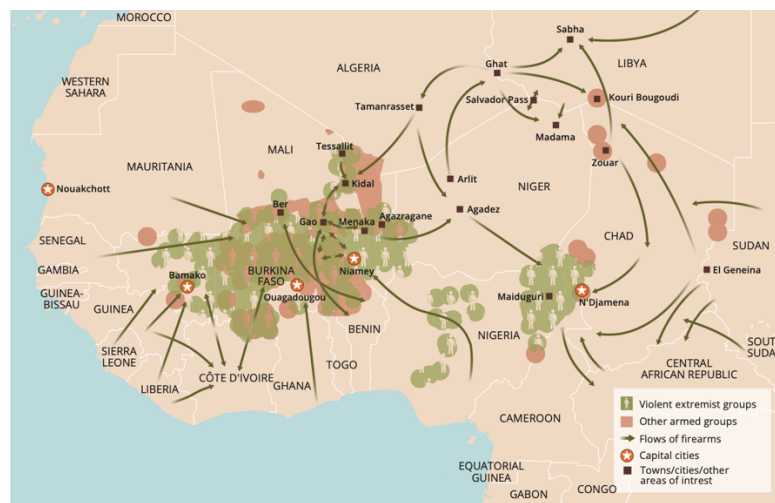
According to the United Nations report: *Firearms Trafficking in the Sahel: Transnational Organized Crime Threat Assessment*, it has been documented an increase in the firearms trafficking into the Sahel region, particularly through the air from France and Turkey via Nigeria. However, most firearms trafficked within the region originate in Africa itself (UNODC, 2022).

As can be seen in Table 5, firearms trafficking in the region is immense. The chaos and security crisis that many analysts announced in Libya has also spread to Mali, especially to the capital of Bamako, which is the core of the flow of firearms in the region.

Weapons arrive in Burkina Faso from Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana, as well as Mali. Firearms trafficking runs through the equity region up to the border with Algeria and Niger. The cities of Arlit and Agadez in Niger are considered points of interest, as they connect the eastern part of the continent with the main hotspots of terrorist activity. In addition, there is an expansion in the cocaine routes that includes Guinea and Mauritania, crossing the north of Mali in the direction of Egypt and Middle East, before entering Europe. According to a recent report it is estimated that cocaine worth \$1.25 billion crossed West Africa, and a significant portion has circulated overland in the Sahel (Instituto Español de Estudios Estratégicos, 2015, p.71).

In the region, handmade weapons are common and, according to Burkina Faso's estimate, 60 percent of the firearms confiscated in the country in 2016/17 were of artisanal production. Violent extremist groups, linked to Al Qaeda and the Islamic State, often use industrial weapons, but may also be involved in trafficking these weapons because of their lower cost (UNODC, 2022, p.14).

Table 5. Firearms trafficking flows in the Sahel. (UNODC, 2022).<sup>5</sup>



The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations. Final boundary between the Republic of Sudan and the Republic of South Sudan has not yet been determined. Source: ACLED data between 1 January 2019 and 7 October 2022. Available at <https://acleddata.com> (accessed 7 October 2022); European Council on Foreign Relations data. Available at [https://ecfr.eu/special/sahel\\_mapping/](https://ecfr.eu/special/sahel_mapping/); Small Arms Survey; UNODC interviews.

Cross-border firearms transfers are common in West Africa, and there is evidence of violent extremist groups sharing or supplying weaponry to each other. An example of this, was the use of ammunition from Malian warehouses in an attack in Togo in 2021,

<sup>5</sup> Source: *Firearms Trafficking in the Sahel: Transnational Organized Crime Threat Assessment*. United Nations: Office on Drugs and Crime. p.18. Retrieved April 10 2023 from [https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/data-and-analysis/Tocta\\_Sahel.html](https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/data-and-analysis/Tocta_Sahel.html)



evidencing the connections between various violent extremist armed groups in several countries, and their ability to move weapons and other goods across borders (Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, 2021).

Sahelian countries should further strengthen their efforts to collect data on firearms trafficking to improve understanding and stem national and transnational trafficking flows, including UN-mandated data collection tools such as the Illegal Arms Flows Questionnaire. There is a need for greater international cooperation at the law enforcement and prosecutorial levels to ensure adequate firearms investigations (UNODC, 2022).

### 5.5.3 International actors

The interventions of countries from different continents in the Sahel region are officially justified on grounds such as the protection of human rights, the strengthening of weak states and the fight against various problems such as terrorism, human, drug, and firearms trafficking, among others. However, it should be noted that the real motive behind these interventions could be the economic benefit derived from the business of war. In the Sahel, despite poverty and corruption, large amounts of money are spent to finance armed conflicts taking place in the region. This spending often exceeds the amount of humanitarian aid received from the international community (Comisión General de Justicia y Paz, Área de Justicia y Solidaridad de CONFER, y Red África-Europa Fe, 2014, p.22).

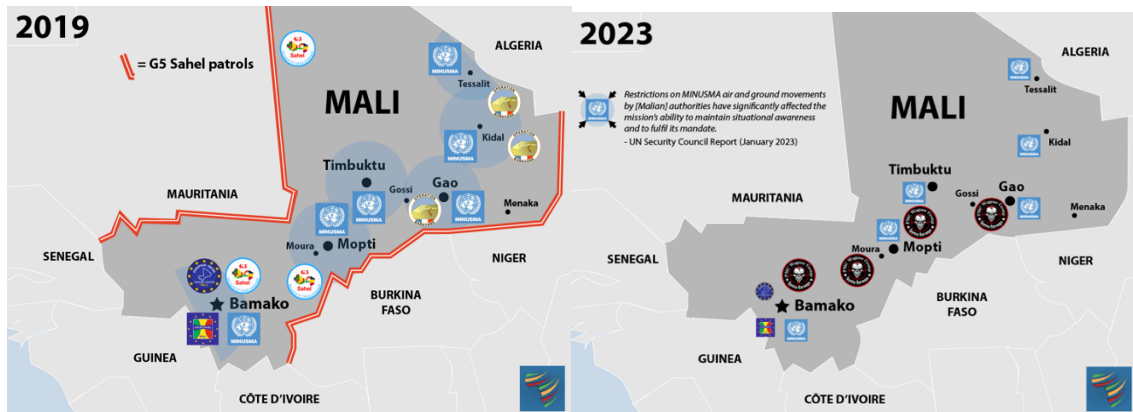
International efforts were expanding throughout the region, with troops deployed in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger in 2019. These troops provided logistical support and training to local security forces. In the last decade, some 21,000 troops were deployed in the territory, but, over the years, the international presence has been reduced. It is becoming increasingly difficult to operate in the Sahel, as casualties and human rights abuses continue to mount, making the situation more and more complex (Wilén and Williams, 2022).

In Mali, we had France at the head, as a former colonial power and with enormous economic interests in the exploitation of mineral resources, oil, etc. In response to Islamic militants approaching the capital of Mali a decade ago, France provided military aid. Because of the forcefulness of Operation Serval, an immense territory like Mali was prevented from falling into the hands of jihadists, which would otherwise have destabilized the entire region, especially Mauritania and Niger. In 2014, the operation Serval of 2013 (just in Mali) was replaced by Operation Barkhane, which expanded its territorial scope in the Sahel, to eradicate terrorism throughout the region. This operation had round 4,000 troops headquartered in Chad and its fundamental mission was to collaborate with the five G5 Sahel countries in the fight against terrorism (Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2023).

However, after nine years in Mali, *Operation Barkhane*, the French military counter-terrorism campaign that began in 2013, withdrew from its base in Mali in August 2022 (King, 2023). The decline of the French forces in northern Mali was associated with the latest attacks received by the Malian military units and has also resulted in the UN mission becoming an easy target for jihadists (Instituto Español de Estudios Estratégicos, 2015). And the fact is that, although it was initially successful and succeeded in recapturing the north central cities of Timbuktu and Gao, and curbing terrorists, the truth is that the region has witnessed thousands of Malian civilian and military casualties, and more than 2.5 million people have been displaced. High rates of violence against civilians and deteriorating diplomatic relations have resulted in a rejection of French troops, who have finally left the region (King, 2023).

In addition, EUTM Mali training activities continue to be suspended, while the reduction in the number of troops making up the mission, of which Spain is the largest contributor, continues (DSN, 2022). The Malian junta's expulsion of the Danish contingent from Takuba in January 2022 precipitated the termination of the EU force. Following Mali's unilateral withdrawal from the G5 Sahel in 2022, the four remaining G5 member states-Niger, Chad, Mauritania and Burkina Faso-have encouraged Mali to return to the regional organization. Since the effectiveness of this joint force is based on joint cross-border operations, the withdrawal of the Malian junta has rendered the G5 inoperative (Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2023).

Table 6. Reduction of MINUSMA. (Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2023).<sup>6</sup>



Niger has implemented a strategy of strengthening defense and security forces, as well as military cooperation with France, the United States and neighboring countries. In Niger we highlight the EU Capacity Building Mission in the Sahel (EUCAP). The objective of EUCAP Sahel Niger is to strengthen the rule of law through training, assistance and advice to Niger's security forces (national police, gendarmerie and National Guard) with a view to fostering regional and international coordination in the Sahel against terrorism and organized crime (Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2019).

However, the European populations are reluctant to deploy more forces in Niger and Burkina Faso, due to associated risks and their focus on Ukraine. The increase in attacks and casualties in Burkina Faso is causing the U.S to be hesitant to increase its forces in the region beyond current assistance roles. The withdrawal of all external Western military actors raises concerns for the MINUSMA, which is currently the most dangerous UN mission. The security forces in these three countries are poorly trained to deal with the threats facing the population, and this means that the military has little motivation to carry out their essential duties. This lack of preparedness to deal with the actions of jihadist groups and the scarcity of means led to the coup d'état (Instituto Español de Estudios Estratégicos, 2015).

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<sup>6</sup> Source: Africa Center for Strategic Studies. (2023). *Malian military junta scuttles security partnerships while militant violence surges*. Africa Center for Strategic Studies. Retrieved April 5, 2023, from <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/mali-military-junta-scuttles-security-partnerships-while-militant-violence-surges/>.

The civilian population, which has already suffered greatly over the past decade, will now be in the hands of local security forces and Russian mercenaries in an increasingly authoritarian climate characterized by impunity (Wilén and Williams, 2022). The tentacles of the Wagner group began to expand in the Sahel at the end of 2021. The mercenaries of the Wagner group, persist in their goal of establishing themselves, by taking advantage of instability, growing anti-French sentiment and the vacuum left by European forces. Moscow not only hopes to reach military or defense agreements with African countries, but also hopes to “*profit from the continent's rich raw materials, such as gold, diamonds, or uranium*” (Arredondas, 2023).

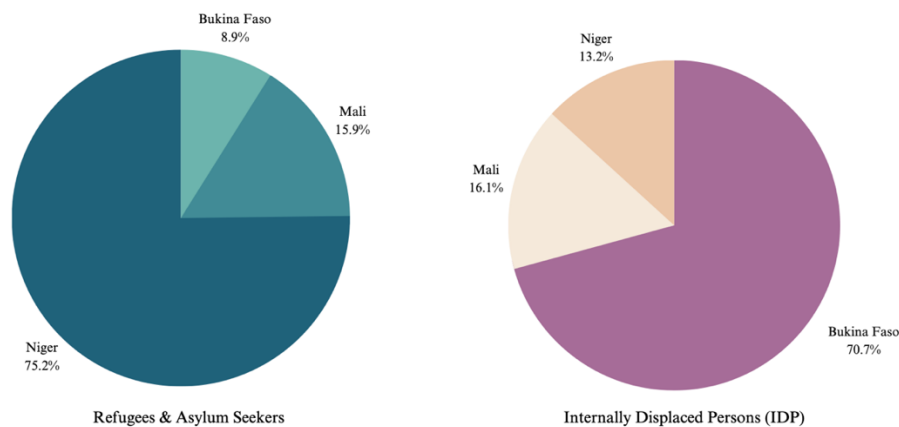
#### 5.5.4 Humanitarian crisis

The last element worth to mention is the humanitarian crisis. In the context of armed conflicts in the Sahel region, there have been numerous population displacements due to violence and instability in the area. According to the International Committee of the Red Cross, conditions for the displaced are extremely harsh, as they find themselves in desert areas with shortages of food and water (Comisión General de Justicia y Paz, Área de Justicia y Solidaridad de CONFER, y Red África-Europa Fe, 2014, p.36). The humanitarian crisis, which has affected millions of people, has created an environment of vulnerability and desperation in which jihadist groups can easily recruit new members. In this context, the fragile situation in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger has created a major threat to regional and global security, and it is important to explore each case.

First, to begin this section, it is necessary to define the difference between refugee, asylum seeker and internally displaced person. Refugees are people who have fled their homes because one or more of their basic human rights have been violated or are in danger of being violated and have travelled across an international border to another country in search of safety. Protection measures for refugees have been developed on a global scale, including the right to non-refoulement, non-discrimination in work, access to healthcare, and freedom of travel. On the other hand, those who have fled their homes and ask for international protection but have not yet been given refugee status are known as asylum seekers. In addition, there are those who are internally displaced who have been compelled to leave their homes for the same reasons that refugees have, but

who have not done so over a border. Though they encounter comparable circumstances, IDPs do not receive the same rights and legal protection as refugees, and "internally displaced" is a descriptive rather than a legal term (Vinci, 2015).

Table 7. Number of refugees, asylum seekers and internally displaced persons per country. Own elaboration with data from UNHCR, & R4Sahel, 2023.<sup>7</sup>



As can be seen in Table 7, all three countries suffer the consequences of violence and instability, resulting in a humanitarian crisis that is difficult to control. Of the total number of refugees and asylum seekers in these three countries (402,735), 75.2 percent are in Niger, 15.9 percent in Mali and 8.9 percent in Burkina Faso. As for the number of internally displaced persons, of the total (2,740,821), 70.7 percent are in Burkina Faso, compared to 16.1 percent in Mali and 13.2 percent in Niger (UNHCR, & R4Sahel, 2023). It is striking that the number of displaced persons is higher than that of refugees. There are several reasons to explain this, starting with border closures. Although many people want to flee their countries and the violence, the countries of Côte d'Ivoire or Libya do not have large asylum procedures and close their borders. In addition, it is difficult to obtain refugee or asylum status due to restrictive immigration policies or lack of resources and capacity to process applications. Overall, there are many factors contributing to the humanitarian crisis, and unfortunately for many people the only

<sup>7</sup> Source: UNHCR, & R4Sahel. (2023). *Coordination platform for forced displacements in Sahel. Situation Sahel Crisis*. Retrieved March 20, 2023, from <https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/sahelcrisis>.

option is to stay in their countries and cope with the dangerous situation (Núñez Villaverde et al., 2009).

As we have seen, Burkina Faso has been a country affected by armed conflict, resulting in the forced displacement of many people. Most of the internally displaced persons are fleeing violence and insecurity, yet they remain within the country. In the case of Burkina Faso, although there are some refugees, their number is less than that of internally displaced persons because it is not a traditional destination country, and they may seek protection in other safer destinations (Instituto Español de Estudios Estratégicos, 2015).

On the other hand, in the case of Niger, many people have fled violence and insecurity in Nigeria's Borno and Yobe states to seek refuge in Niger. In addition, Niger is also hosting displaced people fleeing the conflict in northern Mali. Although the country has experienced internal conflicts as well, the magnitude of insecurity is not as high as in the other two countries. In addition, the Nigerian government and society are implementing more measures to prevent internal displacement and protect these people, so that they are reintegrated and do not have problems returning to their places of origin. However, the number of displaced persons remains high, and more protection and assistance are needed (Núñez Villaverde et al., 2009).

In Mali and Burkina Faso, in addition to the situation of the displaced and refugees, there is a serious problem with the death of innocent children during military campaigns or by war attacks. In Mali, since the beginning of the conflict in 2012, hundreds of thousands of people have been internally displaced, while others have fled to neighboring countries. Children are used as human shields and their docility, often due to being drugged, makes them highly coveted human war material. Sexual violence against girls, forced marriages and slavery by armed groups are also widespread and systematic phenomena in northern Mali. Girls from the light-skinned Bella ethnic group are particularly vulnerable and are considered inferior. In addition, armed groups loot and bomb schools to use them for military purposes, which has led to many pupils not having access to education in Mali. (Comisión General de Justicia y Paz, Área de Justicia y Solidaridad de CONFER, y Red África-Europa Fe, 2014, p.36).

## 6. CONCLUSIONS

As we discussed in the introduction of this research work, the Sahel has become the region of the world where the jihadist threat has proliferated the fastest, both in terms of number and entity of extremist groups, and their scenarios of action. The context in which they settle has become the best nutrient to increase their capacity for recruitment, radicalization, and financing, which are the main supports to maintain their persistence and expansion. The objective of this research was to analyze the jihadist presence in the Sahel, contemplating the consequences that its violent activity generates in the region, and the possible causes that led to its appearance, and which allow its continuity. To this end, this research work provided an analysis of the origins of jihadism in the Sahel, covering the historical, political, economic, social, and ethnic contexts, not only before the outbreak of violence, but also today. The aim was to highlight how different phenomena, such as neo-colonialism or international intervention, incited the ability of terrorists to establish themselves in the countries comprising this African region. In accordance with the hypotheses that were set forth at the beginning of the research and through the study of the presence of Jihadist terrorism in the Sahel, it can be concluded that:

1. The first hypothesis was that Jihadist presence in the Sahel is increasing. In recent years, the number of attacks that have been carried out in the three countries of the comparative analysis has increased, as has the number of victims of these attacks, causing massive displacement in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger. It seems that with the increase in coups, and the reduction of international troops, we will face an increasingly unstable situation and fewer solutions in the face of it, resulting in even more terrorist activity in the coming years.
2. On the other hand, in keeping with the second hypothesis stated, to carry out its activity the main factor exploited by jihadists is not only unstable governments, but also the ease of arms trafficking. In many Sahelian countries where jihadism is present today, unstable governments, corruption, political instability, or the absence of the rule of law or social

demands are common factors. Jihadists exploit local grievances, weak governance, and social frustration among the Muslim population to recruit followers to their vile cause and subject them to their radical, fanatical, and violent interpretation of Islam. In addition, the Sahel is characterized as a transit zone for illegal arms trafficking and other illicit activities. Terrorists have used this facility to obtain firearms and other military equipment needed to carry out their terrorist activities. The complexity and extent of the Sahel region make it difficult to completely eradicate illegal firearms trafficking.

3. Referring to the third and final hypothesis, the final finding linked to this hypothesis illuminates that colonialism and the international presence in the region has more negative consequences than positive. Although there have been benefits in terms of humanitarian aid, support for anti-terrorist troops and in terms of development, the foreign presence creates tensions and imbalances in the Sahel region. The positive actions are overshadowed by the perception of occupation, coupled with neocolonialism, contributing to the emergence of jihadist movements seeking to fight against oppression and restore independence (using a rhetoric based on anti-colonialism).

In the elaboration of this research paper, some other important realizations were achieved which are worth noticing. For example, that there are few international actors with sufficient knowledge to analyze such a complex issue, and they highlight the lack of sufficient data to be able to assess the level of terrorist activity in the Sahel. Also, the use of the different theories, especially the humiliation and radicalization theories, have helped to understand the parties involved, and to have a basis for analysis, but one of the great difficulties was to find accurate information on the number of attacks and deaths per year in these countries.

It is important to understand that while it is concluded that jihadist activity and presence continues to grow regionally, the factors that contributed to its development in each country differ from each other. Given the vast territory and ethnic heterogeneity of the



Sahel, these challenges vary from region to region. To overcome this challenge, the comparative analysis went on to assess the role of jihadism in each nation, and highlighted the important features that impact societies in each case, providing the necessary context to understand the different situations.

However, it is important to take into consideration that this research paper only focused on a region of the African continent out of the many regions that do suffer from jihadist terrorism. Although the selection of only three countries allowed for an in-depth analysis of the events that occurred, it would be interesting for future lines of investigation to consider other countries and regions. The terrorists' concept of democracy and future expansion into Europe should also be studied extensively. At the same time, existing peace agreements can be explored to reach conclusions that will help to raise the white flag in the future.

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## 8. ANNEXES

**ANEX I:** This interview was conducted with a Spanish military officer, who participated in the International Mission in the Sahel representing Spain. This interview helps to better understand the current situation in the Sahel, especially in Mali, where international troops are stationed.

### **Interview with Spanish military in the International Mission in the Sahel:**

#### **What is the EUTM-MALI mission like?**

Under international commitment, UN resolutions are passed, and nations are invited to act: aid to Mali in this case. In turn, the country of origin approves the presence of foreigners. Spain sends troops, always after being approved by the parliament. Among the troops we find the Force Protection Unit (protection of camps and accompaniment, without combat patrols), that provide support to the Malians and their army. The problem of space in Mali is something to consider, as the barracks are in the middle of the city. Also, many Malians are better trained than the Western troops themselves.

#### **What is its structure?**

Military Command is located in Brussels. At the top we find the Mission Commander, who talks to local authorities to carry out the mission: objective to reinforce the Malian armed forces. They instruct and reform. Advisory Task Force: teaching functions of logistical planning, communication plans, armed forces structure. The troops are trained, however, there is a problem of communication and a language barrier.

#### **Have there been significant changes in terms of international presence?**

Institutionally, the anti-French discourse has been noted. This has given rise to propaganda and social movements.

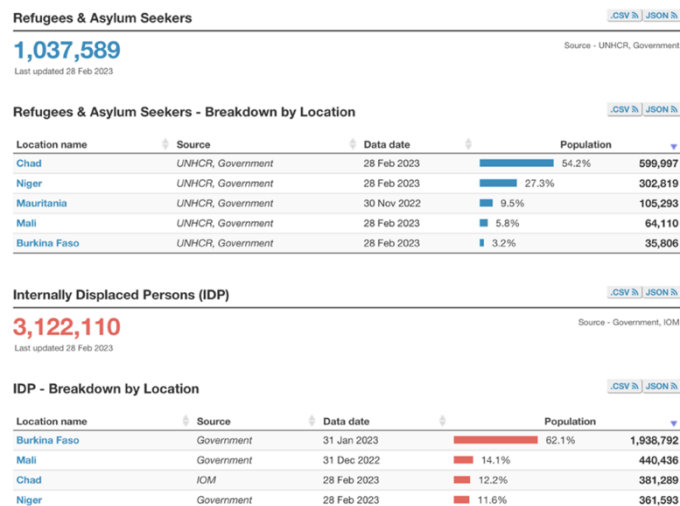
MINUSMA continues (cease-fire mandate, monitoring, civil protection, discussion tables...) which invests 1,262M per year.

The most important thing now is to put an end to the trafficking of arms and people (kidnappings), which are the means of financing the jihadist terrorists.

**What is the role of the Russians in the Sahel?**

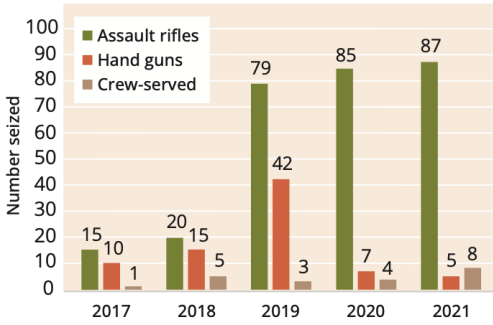
Conduct a French disinformation campaign. There was a French ultimatum to the Russian entry. The Malians prefer the Russians, and there is movement of troops, because the Russians give them materials, accompany them in combat... With the Russians driving the French out of Mali and Burkina Faso, humanitarian aid has ceased.

**ANEX II:** These tables have been used to prepare Table 6, which indicates the number of refugees and internally displaced persons in each country of the comparative analysis. Source: UNHCR, & R4Sahel. (2023). *Coordination platform for forced displacements in Sahel. Situation Sahel Crisis.* <https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/sahelcrisis>

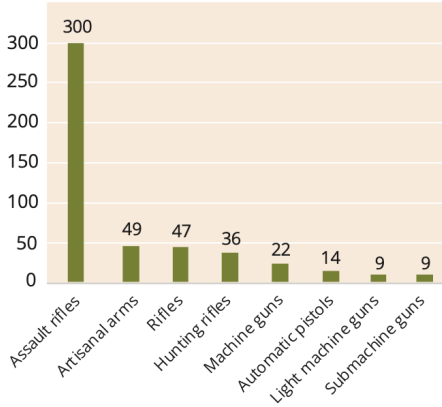


**ANEX III:** These tables were used to study the number of weapons from 2017-2021 in Burkina Faso (left), and from 2014-2020 in Mali (right). Source: UNODC. (2022). *Firearms Trafficking in the Sahel: Transnational Organized Crime Threat Assessment.* United Nations: Office on Drugs and Crime. [https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/data-and-analysis/Tocta\\_Sahel.html](https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/data-and-analysis/Tocta_Sahel.html)

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Source: Burkina Faso National Commission on Small Arms and Light Weapons (CNLPAL), 8 February 2022.



Source: Secrétariat Permanent de la lutte contre la prolifération des armes légères et de petits calibre, Mali, 28 December 2021.

**ANEX IV:** This map was used in the comparative analysis and shows the international efforts in the Sahel in 2021. Source: Pye, K. (2021). *The Sahel Europe’s forever war?* *Center for European Reform*, (2) 1–14.

