



Introduction to the issue

Coups and Terror in the Sahel:

Terrorist Groups' Exploitation of State Fragility and Ungoverned Spaces

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Since 1950, Africa has experienced more successful and unsuccessful coups than any other continent. Since 2020, there have been nine successful coups in West and Central Africa. A failed coup attempt in Sierra Leone in November 2023 led to the capture of thirteen military commanders, and a similar attempt in Guinea-Bissau in December resulted in gunfire between the insurgents and security forces. Senegal, known for its stability and peaceful changes of power through democratic and electoral mechanisms, faced concerns about these processes at the beginning of 2024. Coups are on the rise in West and Central Africa due to increased state fragility, as well as other factors that have generated a mutually reinforcing dynamic between terrorism and destabilisation and ungoverned spaces throughout the Sahel (Mahmoud & Taifouri, 2023; Taruvinga, 2023).

While each coup has its own unique characteristics, they all share some common elements. To varying degrees, all Sahelian countries have faced the burdens and challenges of colonialism and foreign intervention, with governments either unable or unwilling to adequately protect and advance the welfare of their citizens, an under-represented youth demographic, corruption, jihadist ideologies or activities, and the failure of international stability efforts. Extremist violence is on the rise in the Sahel, which some experts have dubbed the 'new battleground for terrorism', accounting for 43% of worldwide terrorist fatalities by 2023. Burkina Faso and Mali account for 52% of total terrorist deaths in Africa (Africa Defense Forum, ADF, 2023).

The coups and the withdrawal of French and US military forces from the Sahel region have created power vacuums that state actors (Russia, China) and non-state entities (jihadist groups active in the region) may fill. The absence of a stable government, ungoverned spaces, and actors seeking to fill these power vacuums have already had a significant negative impact on nearby regions and states. 1) Migration pressure from Sahel countries is mounting on the European Union (EU); 2) Jihadist groups affiliated with Al-Qaeda or the Islamic State have turned the Sahel region into their new stronghold; 3) Humanitarian repercussions, especially hunger and health concerns, have become more prevalent; and 4) The emergence of non-traditional security challenges has exacerbated existing conditions (Ray, 2024).



This thematic issue of JCEEAS, titled ‘Coups and Terror in the Sahel: Terrorist Groups’ Exploitation of Fragile States and Ungoverned Spaces’, features seven articles that adopt diverse methodological and theoretical approaches. The issue also includes reviews of four recently published books.

The first article in the issue, by Péter Rada and Alex Pongrácz, on state building under the Liberal World Order (LWO), highlights the notion that universal adherence to liberal rules can promote global security. After 9/11, particularly after the 2003 invasion of Iraq, state building transitioned from humanitarian operations to a tactic of great power politics. The essay conceptualises state building under LWO in light of contemporary geopolitical crises. Their study critiques the implementation of nation building, suggesting that failures stem from American-led efforts rather than the underlying theory itself. They propose a set of interrelated Liberal World Order presumptions, including state building to enforce universal principles.

The study focuses on the Westphalian system, which established state sovereignty as a fundamental concept of international relations, allowing states to determine their internal political institutions without external interference. The authors demonstrate that, despite its idealistic basis, the system has experienced challenges, including selective adherence to non-intervention rules by powerful states. Rada and Pongrácz critique the concept of absolute sovereignty, suggesting that contemporary problems need a rethinking of state sovereignty and intervention norms.

Most notably, the authors study violent shifts, coups, and instability in Africa by linking intervention, Westphalia, and the Ukraine war to the continent and state building. The authors explain how colonial legacies have hampered state building on the continent, causing internal tensions and national identity issues. The paper advocates for context-specific approaches that build on indigenous governance models rather than externally imposed solutions. They argue that state building is essential for the Liberal World Order, especially in unstable regions. This is especially applicable to the Sahel and elsewhere in Africa. The diversity of state building outcomes in Africa illustrates the difficulties and the need to adapt to local situations.

The second article by Edson Ziso and Antonetta Hamandishe uses a qualitative descriptive approach to look into the link between terrorism, state fragility, and coups. It focuses on Niger and Burkina Faso and shows how recent coup attempts have helped terrorist activities spread by putting them in the historical context of political instability in the region. As the authors demonstrate, Burkina Faso and Niger have long struggled with challenges of governance, capacity, and legitimacy, resulting in enormous ungoverned space and a convergence of variables that have created an atmosphere conducive to the growth of terrorist groups.

In the third article, ‘Military regimes in the Sahel as recruitment sergeants for rebel governance’, Samuel Edet, Efeiong Edet, and Nwankwo Guzoro Chi Confidence discuss the rise of military regimes in Mali and Burkina Faso in response to violent extremist organisation-caused security crises. Even when military governments legitimise rebel administrations by allowing violent extremist organisations to exist, violence and human insecurity continue to rise in these locations, according to



the authors. But they thrive on state fragility, not state-building, unlike other actors in the international system.

The authors examine the region's key actors and discuss how military regimes contribute to insecurity. The reliance on external parties for security, such as the Wagner Group, has resulted in human rights violations and greater instability. When assessing the impacts of military regimes, the authors contend that they jeopardise human and political security by portraying civil society as adversarial. This degradation in state-civil society relations fuels a cycle of violence and conflict, undermining efforts to develop stable administration. Military regimes, despite presenting themselves as effective alternatives to civilian administrations, have contributed to the problem by perpetuating the very risks they seek to eliminate.

The fourth article by Yasmin Arshad and Sehrish Qayyum investigates the relationship between military power and PMSCs, as well as their historical, environmental, and political consequences, set against the backdrop of state fragility and the region's security vacuums. The region's cycle revolves around the cross-currents of terrorist groups, the roles of PMSCs in current conflicts, and the interplay between the military and PMCS. Historical grievances, prevalent in numerous Sahelian countries, intensify the Sahelian government's reliance on PMSCs in the broader trend of militarisation as a response to security issues. Even though they frequently alienate local populations and governments and threaten national and regional security, PMSCs provide a crucial role or service.

They consider three cases: Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger. From a constructivist perspective, the authors consider how social norms and identities affect state PMSC usage, typically prioritising national identity over strategic benefits. Military regimes view PMSCs as crucial partners in handling security challenges; they legitimise them. The authors incorporate the legacy of colonial authority and external geopolitical interests into their analysis, which shapes the Sahel's military governance environment and leads to recurring cycles of military coups. The three case studies' recent military coups illustrate public frustration with corruption and security failings, typically resulting in populist leaders.

In the fifth article, 'A gendered analysis of the wave of coups and terrorism in the Sahel', Zainab Monisola Olaitan explores the disproportionate impact of terrorism and military coups on women in the Sahel region, a region grappling with a humanitarian crisis due to economic decline, climate change, and political instability. She advocates for gendered analysis to inform preventive measures and enhance human security and gender equality in the midst of continuing conflicts. In patriarchal countries, restricting rules makes women and girls more vulnerable to violence during conflicts. A feminist lens highlights how conflict weaponises women's bodies, increasing sexual violence and rights violations. Extremist groups often perpetrate and benefit from the exploitation of women as weapons of power and war.

Olaitan emphasises the role of foreign actors, like the Wagner Group, in African conflicts and instability, noting that coups in the Sahel region have allowed governments to conduct military



operations with fewer human rights constraints and often under the guise of societal protection. The author emphasises that women endure hardships during conflicts, yet they frequently face neglect or silence. Wartime rape has been considered both instinctual and deliberate. Soldiers may be ordered to have sex with women as vulnerable civilians as a pacification measure to instil fear and silence, or because soldiers who battle desire are permitted to indulge in sexual acts.

In the enduring Sudanese civil war, women and rape have been seen as forced ‘necessities’, with victims perceiving their ‘compliance’ in rape for scarce but essential food as a survival tactic. Traditional media rarely covers these concerns, especially in the West. Displacement increases their risk. Olaitan’s article highlights the deterioration of women’s rights in the Sahel region, which can be attributed to the fragility of the state, the lack of security guarantors, and the involvement of rebel groups in the conflict. The article advocates for targeted interventions to address the needs of women affected by war.

The sixth article, ‘Africa’s Transformation into a Global Terrorist Hub’, by Ilas Touazi, asks: ‘How is the hybridisation process of African jihadist threats articulated around a triptych of “narco-jihadism”, “sea jihad”, and “nikah jihad” (“sexual jihad”)?’ It explores both endogenous and exogenous factors that influence the spread of jihadists, with a focus on the hybridisation of jihadist threats.

The seventh article by Abdelhadi Baiche, titled ‘The effects of strategic rivalries on non-rival neighbouring small states: Mauritania’s political stability—shelter diplomacy to manage the Algeria-Morocco strategic rivalry’, examines a unique case study through the lens of geopolitical competition and the terrorist threats the country faces. 2019 was an important year for Mauritania as it saw its first peaceful and constitutional transfer of power; the country has not experienced a military coup since 2009. As a result, Mauritania has been regarded as a ray of stability in the coup-prone Sahel. Due in large part to its close connections with France, which provides the country with both military and economic backing, Baiche attributes Mauritania’s political stability to its strategic use of ‘shelter diplomacy’.

This issue of JCEEAS will look at how these challenges intersect, with an emphasis on state fragility and so-called ‘coup contagion’ across the Sahel. We hope that the contents of the issue contribute meaningfully to the ongoing scholarly debate concerning the links between state fragility, coups, terrorism, and ungoverned spaces in the Sahel and elsewhere in Africa, as well as other regional settings. We believe that this issue’s collection of essays will be informative for scholars and students interested in security, terrorism, and other related topics.



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