

US Security Assistance to Africa: Implications for Counter-Terrorism in the Sahel Region, 2017–2022

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Abstract

The escalation of jihadist violence across the Sahel between 2017 and 2022 raised urgent and unresolved questions about the effectiveness of external counter-terrorism strategies. Despite sustained military training, arms transfers, intelligence sharing, and capacity-building programmes implemented through mechanisms such as the Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership (TSCTP), Foreign Military Financing (FMF), and the United States Africa Command (AFRICOM), terrorist violence in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger intensified dramatically during the period under review. By 2022, the Sahel had emerged as the global epicentre of terrorism-related fatalities, surpassing the Middle East and South Asia, while the same years witnessed successive military coups in key US security partner states, raising profound questions about the relationship between external military assistance and democratic governance. This paper critically examines the implications of US security assistance for counter-terrorism in the Sahel. The study analyses the strategic frameworks underpinning US engagement, the operational architecture of its assistance programmes, and the political and security consequences of sustained external military support in fragile postcolonial states. The paper argues that US security assistance during the period under review functioned more as a tactical stabiliser than a transformative force: it strengthened specific operational capabilities of regional partners but failed to reverse insurgent expansion, prevent democratic backsliding, or address the structural drivers of violence rooted in governance failure, economic marginalisation, and state legitimacy deficits. The study concludes by arguing that sustainable counter-terrorism in the Sahel requires a strategic rebalancing toward governance reform, accountability mechanisms, and inclusive

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state-building processes alongside, rather than subordinate to, military capacity-building.

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Introduction

The Sahel region of West and Central Africa has emerged in the twenty-first century as one of the most contested security environments on the African continent. Stretching across a semi-arid belt encompassing Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, Chad, Mauritania and others, the region has experienced a dramatic and escalating cycle of jihadist insurgency, state fragility, and political instability that has drawn sustained attention from international security actors. The emergence of transnational extremist organizations including Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM), and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) has transformed the Sahel into what the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED, 2022) identified as the global epicentre of terrorism-related fatalities, surpassing even the Middle East and South Asia by the early 2020s. These developments have posed fundamental challenges not only to the sovereignty of Sahelian states but to the architecture of international counter-terrorism strategy.

The United States has been a central external actor in the Sahel's security landscape since the early 2000s. The September 11, 2001 attacks in the United State reoriented American foreign policy toward a global war on terror that explicitly identified weak African territories as potential sanctuaries for transnational jihadist networks (Whitaker, 2010). Owing to the fear that some Sahelian states would not be able to defend themselves against terrorist incursion informed partly the establishment of the United States Africa

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Command (AFRICOM) in 2007, which consolidated and formalized US military engagement across the continent. Complementary programmes such as the Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership (TSCTP), Foreign Military Financing (FMF), and International Military Education and Training (IMET) provided Sahelian governments with military training, equipment, intelligence cooperation, and institutional capacity-building aimed at suppressing extremist networks and strengthening state security apparatus (US Department of State, 2021; Pham, 2011).

Between 2017 and 2022, US security assistance to the Sahel reached unprecedented scale. The period encompassed the strategic recalibrations of both the Trump and Biden administrations, each of which maintained the core framework of security engagement while adjusting emphasis between counter-terrorism priorities and broader foreign policy objectives. Yet the paradox of this period is stark: US assistance intensified even as regional violence escalated, civilian casualties rose, state authority contracted in some parts of the territories, and the governments of Mali and Burkina Faso which were principal recipients of American security cooperation fell to successive military coups (International Crisis Group, 2022; ACLED, 2022). This divergence between the scale of external investment and the deterioration of security conditions constitutes the central analytical problem this paper addresses.

Scholarly and policy debates on the effectiveness of US security assistance remain profoundly contested. Proponents argue that such assistance enhances partner capacity, prevents the direct deployment of American forces, and maintains strategic influence in regions susceptible to extremist consolidation (Byman, 2008; Biddle, Macdonald, and Baker, 2018). Critics contend that the predominantly militarized orientation of US engagement neglects the socio-economic and governance roots of terrorism, may embolden authoritarian practices within recipient states, and risks reinforcing cycles of violence by strengthening coercive institutions without parallel accountability reforms (Thurston, 2020; International Crisis Group, 2020). Particularly salient are concerns about the relationship between US military training programmes

and the subsequent involvement of trained personnel in unconstitutional seizures of power.

Against this background, this paper critically examines the implications of US security assistance for counter-terrorism in the Sahel between 2017 and 2022. It traces the historical evolution of US engagement, analyses the strategic logic and operational architecture of assistance programmes during the period, assesses the impact on terrorism trends and governance stability, and interrogates the structural limitations that have constrained the effectiveness of military-centred approaches. By grounding the analysis in both empirical security data and theoretical frameworks of Realism and Securitization Theory, the paper contributes to ongoing debates about the conditions under which external security assistance generates durable stability rather than reinforcing the structural vulnerabilities it ostensibly seeks to address.

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

Security assistance, terrorism, and counter-terrorism are contested concepts that require precise definition. Security assistance refers to the array of military, financial, logistical, intelligence, and training support that one state provides to another in order to strengthen its defence capabilities, internal stability, and strategic alignment (Biddle, 2017; US Department of Defence, 2020). Unlike traditional foreign aid oriented toward development and humanitarian objectives, security assistance is fundamentally rooted in national security calculations and geopolitical interests. It encompasses mechanisms such as Foreign Military Financing, International Military Education and Training, counter-terrorism partnerships, arms transfers, and institutional capacity-building initiatives. At its core, security assistance operates on the assumption that strengthening allied states can serve as a cost-effective means of advancing strategic objectives without large-scale military deployment, an assumption whose validity in the Sahelian context this paper critically evaluates.

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Terrorism in the Sahel is one of the most analytically contested phenomena in contemporary African security studies. Schmid (2011) offers a widely cited synthesis, defining terrorism as a method of repeated violent action by clandestine actors aimed at instilling fear beyond immediate victims for political, ideological, or religious purposes. In the Sahelian context, this captures the operations of JNIM, ISGS, and Boko Haram/ISWAP, whose violence is designed not merely to eliminate targets but to undermine state legitimacy and reshape territorial authority (International Crisis Group, 2022). Terrorism in the Sahel is not simply imported extremism. Thurston (2020) demonstrates that jihadist insurgencies in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso are deeply embedded in local political dynamics, communal conflicts, governance failures, and socio-economic marginalisation, rather than being reducible to transnational ideological networks. Any evaluation of counter-terrorism effectiveness must therefore engage with the structural drivers of violence alongside its tactical and operational manifestations. Counter-terrorism itself encompasses policies and strategies designed to prevent, deter, and respond to terrorism, ranging from kinetic military operations and targeted strikes to community engagement, de-radicalisation programmes, and institutional reform (Cronin, 2009). In the Sahel, counter-terrorism has largely assumed a heavily militarised character, yet the persistence and expansion of violence suggests that this militarised framing has not resolved the fundamental political and governance conditions that sustain insurgency. This paper adopts two complementary theoretical lenses Realism and Securitization Theory as its analytical framework. Together, the frameworks explain both why the United States invests so heavily in Sahelian security and why the investment has produced limited transformative outcomes.

Realism remains one of the foundational paradigms in International Relations theory, emphasising the primacy of power, national interest, and survival within an anarchic international system in which no central authority exists to guarantee state security (Morgenthau, 1948; Waltz, 1979). Applied to US security assistance in Africa, Realism offers a compelling explanation for the prioritisation of counter-terrorism partnerships. From a realist

perspective, the emergence of armed groups affiliated with Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State in the Sahel represented not only local insurgencies but potential nodes within broader networks capable of projecting transnational violence. Security assistance becomes, within this framework, a strategic instrument of indirect power projection: maintaining influence and containing threats through partnership rather than direct occupation. The 2017–2022 period further underscores this geopolitical logic. The expanding Chinese and Russian strategic footprints in Africa including the Wagner Group's deployment in Mali from 2021 intensified US incentives to maintain security partnerships as instruments of geopolitical balancing (White House, 2022). Realism effectively explains why the United States invests in Sahelian security forces despite the region's limited economic weight in global trade. Its limitation, however, lies in insufficient attention to the internal dynamics of recipient states, the governance deficits, corruption, and legitimacy crises that constrain the effectiveness of externally reinforced military capacity and that Realism's state-centric optic cannot fully illuminate.

Securitization Theory, developed by Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver, and Jaap de Wilde of the Copenhagen School, provides the second analytical anchor (Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde, 1998). This theory argues that security is not an objective condition but a socially constructed process: an issue becomes a security concern not because it is inherently threatening, but because political actors successfully frame it as an existential threat to a valued referent object through what Wæver (1995) terms a 'speech act.' Once successfully securitised, issues are removed from normal political debate and legitimised as requiring extraordinary measures. Applied to the Sahel, Securitization Theory explains how terrorism in the region was incorporated into the global war on terror narrative. The framing of the Sahel as an 'ungoverned space' vulnerable to extremist exploitation transformed what might otherwise have been viewed as localised insurgencies into components of a global security threat, justifying expanded military cooperation, drone surveillance, and intelligence-sharing operations. This securitised framing, however, carries structural risks: it narrows policy space, privileges coercive instruments over

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political reform, and can contribute to the militarisation of governance in fragile recipient states. In Mali and Burkina Faso, governments invoked counter-terror imperatives to justify emergency laws and expanded executive authority, producing governance dynamics that Securitization Theory identifies as inherent to the logic of emergency politics and that ultimately contributed to the political crises culminating in military coups. The combination of Realism and Securitization Theory enables a critical analysis that moves beyond descriptive narration. Realism explains the strategic motivations for US engagement; Securitization Theory explains how the political construction of that engagement shaped its governance consequences for recipient states and constrained the policy alternatives available to both external actors and Sahelian governments. Together, they illuminate the central paradox this paper addresses: sustained and substantial investment in security that produces tactical gains but not structural transformation.

The Sahel Region and the Evolution of US Security Assistance

The Sahel occupies a distinctive historical and geopolitical position in African history, forming a semi-arid transitional belt between the Sahara Desert and the savannah regions of West and Central Africa. Far from being a peripheral or historically inert zone, the Sahel functioned for centuries as a critical corridor of trans-Saharan commerce, intellectual exchange, and political formation. Between the eighth and sixteenth centuries, the region witnessed the successive emergence of the Ghana, Mali, and Songhai empires, which exercised control over lucrative trade routes in gold and salt, developed complex administrative institutions, and produced renowned centres of Islamic scholarship at Timbuktu and Djenné (Hunwick, 2003; Levzion and Hopkins, 2000). These imperial formations challenge narratives that portray the Sahel as historically stateless or inherently ungovernable. The trans-Saharan trade networks embedded the region within broader systems of Islamic learning, commercial regulation, and political legitimacy, producing

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a political culture in which authority was simultaneously territorial, religious, and commercial characteristics whose disruption under colonial rule would prove consequential for subsequent stability.

The late nineteenth century marked a decisive rupture in this political evolution. European imperial expansion, formalised through the Berlin Conference of 1884–1885, partitioned Africa and incorporated the western and central Sahel into French West Africa and French Equatorial Africa. The imposition of colonial authority restructured political institutions, disrupted patterns of pastoral mobility, and introduced centralised administrative systems that frequently conflicted with pre-existing forms of authority (Boone, 2003). Arbitrary colonial boundaries divided historically interconnected communities across multiple jurisdictions, embedding future tensions within the post-colonial state system. Tuareg and Fulani pastoralist communities, whose traditional transhumance routes spanned vast territories, found their mobility constrained by demarcated frontiers bearing little relationship to ecological or cultural geography (Lecocq, 2010). Colonial economic policy further entrenched structural dependency by integrating Sahelian territories into global commodity chains as suppliers of raw materials, while underinvesting in education, administrative capacity, and diversified production that would have prepared these territories for effective self-governance.

Post-independence trajectories across the Sahel reflected the weight of these colonial inheritances. Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, and Chad achieved sovereignty in the early 1960s but inherited centralised administrative systems designed for extraction rather than inclusive governance, with limited infrastructural reach, shallow bureaucratic capacity, and unresolved centre-periphery tensions (Cooper, 2002). Military interventions became recurrent features of post-colonial political life, while structural adjustment programmes of the 1980s and 1990s, mandated by international financial institutions, and further weakened state capacity by curtailing public investment in social services (Bayart, 2009). Recurrent droughts intensified socio-economic stress and deepened competition over land and water

resources, while unresolved Tuareg grievances over political exclusion and uneven development produced cyclical rebellions that the post-colonial state lacked the legitimacy and capacity to resolve through political negotiation (Mortimore, 1989; Lecocq, 2010). The consolidation of jihadist networks from the late 1990s onward was therefore not an exogenous intrusion into an otherwise stable region; it was the strategic exploitation of governance vacuums and communal grievances that colonial and post-colonial state formation had produced and left unresolved (Thurston, 2020; Dowd and Raleigh, 2013). The 2011 collapse of the Libyan state, which proliferated arms and fighters across the region, and the 2012 jihadist occupation of northern Mali provided the empirical shock that accelerated the internationalisation of Sahelian counter-terrorism, drawing France, the United Nations, and the United States into sustained military engagement.

The United States' security engagement with the Sahel evolved over two decades from reactive episodic interventions into an institutionalised counter-terrorism architecture. During the Cold War, US involvement in African security was ideologically driven and secondary to other geopolitical theatres, providing military assistance to regimes aligned with Western interests rather than investing in sustainable regional security governance (Schraeder, 1994). The September 11, 2001 attacks in the United States effected a decisive strategic recalibration, framing weakly governed African territories as potential terrorist sanctuaries and producing a sustained expansion of military engagement. The Pan-Sahel Initiative of 2002–2004 represented the first institutionalised US counter-terrorism programme in the region, evolving into the Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership in 2005, which expanded both geographic scope and programmatic ambition across a network of Sahelian states (Ploch, 2011). The establishment of AFRICOM in 2007 institutionalised this engagement at the command level, consolidating previously fragmented responsibilities and providing a unified structure for planning, coordinating, and implementing security assistance and counter-terrorism operations across the continent (US Department of Defence, 2007). By the eve of the 2012 Malian crisis, US engagement had become

institutionalised through training pipelines, intelligence platforms, and security cooperation agreements yet the rapid collapse of Malian forces in the face of jihadist advances demonstrated that years of capacity-building had not produced the resilience required to contain active insurgent expansion without sustained external support. This lesson would shape the intensification of engagement during the 2017–2022 period under review.

US Security Assistance and Counter-Terrorism in the Sahel, 2017–2022

Between 2017 and 2022, US security assistance to some states in the Sahel operated within two distinct but structurally continuous strategic frameworks shaped by successive administrations. The Trump administration's 2017 National Security Strategy emphasised great power competition and burden-sharing, reorienting US strategic attention toward China and Russia while identifying jihadist terrorism as a persistent secondary threat (White House, 2017). Within this framework, the Sahel was not a primary strategic theatre, yet the deteriorating security environment prevented outright disengagement. Rather than expanding troop deployments, the administration relied on security force assistance, intelligence sharing, and targeted counter-terrorism operations conducted through regional partners, reflecting the 'light footprint' doctrine institutionalised through AFRICOM. The October 2017 Tongo Tongo ambush, in which four US soldiers were killed during an advisory mission in Niger, underscored both the embedded nature and the operational risks of American counter-terrorism advisory presence in the region, generating congressional scrutiny that temporarily strained the political sustainability of low-profile engagement (Congressional Research Service, 2020). The Biden administration introduced a recalibrated framework emphasising democracy, civilian protection, and institutional accountability, reflecting the 2022 National Security Strategy's attempt to link security assistance to normative commitments (White House, 2022). This reorientation became operationally significant following military coups in Mali and Burkina Faso. In accordance with Section 7008 of annual

appropriations legislation, which prohibits certain forms of security assistance to governments that assumed power through unconstitutional means, the administration suspended specific programmes following Mali's May 2021 coup and Burkina Faso's 2022 coups (US Department of State, 2022). Despite these differences in framing and conditionality, both administrations sustained the core operational architecture of capacity-building, intelligence cooperation, and partner enablement through Niger as the central remaining pillar of engagement.

The operational architecture of US assistance during 2017–2022 was anchored in three interconnected mechanisms. Section 333 (Building Partner Capacity) authority provided the primary legal foundation for training and equipment programmes, funding counter-improvised explosive device techniques, intelligence fusion, reconnaissance operations, and special operations tactics for forces in Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso (Thomas, 2021). Air Base 201 in Agadez, Niger, functioned simultaneously as a drone surveillance hub and a logistical-training platform, providing persistent intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) coverage across the tri-border area and enabling real-time operational support for regional forces. Foreign Military Financing and IMET programmes sustained military-to-military relationships and professional development across partner states, embedding American institutional influence within the organisational cultures of the Sahelian armed forces. The Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership remained the overarching programmatic framework, nominally combining military assistance with governance and development components, though the operational emphasis remained firmly on security force capability enhancement rather than structural political reform.

The impact of these programmes on terrorism trends between 2017 and 2022 reveals the central paradox of US engagement. ACLED data revealed that rather than stabilising, the Sahel experienced a dramatic escalation in terrorism-related violence throughout the period, with Burkina Faso recording the highest fatalities globally after 2019 (ACLED, 2022). United Nations Security Council reports documented the expanding JNIM and ISGS

operational zones across the tri-border area throughout 2019–2022, illustrating that insurgent networks retained the capacity to extend territorial influence despite sustained military pressure (United Nations Security Council, 2021; 2022). In Mali, extremist groups deepened rural control and intensified attacks against both civilian populations and state security forces. In Burkina Faso, violence spread from Northern provinces into eastern and central regions, displacing millions and fragmenting state administrative presence over vast territories. Niger's comparatively greater resilience attributed partly to stronger institutional continuity and the operational benefits of U.S. ISR support suggested that American engagement contributed to containment rather than elimination of the jihadist threat (International Crisis Group, 2020). This is a meaningful but substantially more modest achievement than the strategic objective of sustainable counter-terrorism success that justified the investment.

The adaptive capacity of Sahelian jihadist movements provides the primary explanation for this limited impact. Thurston (2020) demonstrates that groups such as JNIM function as hybrid political-military actors embedded within local communities and political economies rather than as externally directed terrorist franchises. Their resilience depends on exploiting communal tensions, providing dispute resolution functions in areas of weak state presence, and leveraging governance grievances related to state neglect and official corruption. As a result, counter-terror operations focused primarily on kinetic disruption even those that neutralised individual commanders or temporarily degraded operational capacity could not dismantle the social and political foundations of insurgent influence. United Nations reporting confirms this pattern: insurgent groups consistently demonstrated the capacity to regenerate within permissive governance environments even after tactical setbacks, shifting operations geographically to avoid concentrated pressure while preserving their organisational networks (United Nations Security Council, 2022). This dynamic reveals the fundamental limitation of assistance architectures that enhance military

capability without addressing the governance conditions that determine whether that capability produces durable security.

Evidence from human rights monitoring bodies further complicates the impact assessment. Human Rights Watch (2020; 2022) documented allegations of extrajudicial killings and collective punishment by Malian and Burkinabe security forces during counter-terrorism operations. Research on counter-insurgency dynamics demonstrates that civilian harm can increase insurgent recruitment by reinforcing narratives of state predation and eroding the social legitimacy on which effective counter-terrorism depends (Biddle, Friedman, and Shapiro, 2012). In fragile political environments where state institutions already struggle for legitimacy in peripheral regions, the strengthening of coercive capacity without parallel accountability mechanisms risks generating the very grievances that fuel the insurgencies it seeks to suppress. The coups in Mali in 2020 and 2021 and in Burkina Faso in 2022 provided the most dramatic illustration of the structural tension between external military assistance and governance stability. Powell (2012) argues that coup risk increases when military institutions gain cohesion and operational capacity in environments where civilian oversight remains weak. While there is no direct evidence that US-provided training caused these coups, the recurrence of unconstitutional changes of government in key security partners demonstrates that years of capacity-building had strengthened security institutions without producing the democratic resilience and civilian control that would have made political intervention by armed forces less likely or less acceptable. Following Mali's shift toward Russian security partnerships from 2021 and the withdrawal of French Operation Barkhane, US influence over operational standards and human rights compliance was significantly reduced, fragmenting the regional security architecture at precisely the moment when coherent coordination was most urgently needed.

Current Challenges and Critical Analysis of US Counter-Terrorism Assistance

The current challenges confronting US counter-terrorism assistance in the Sahel are structural, operational, and normative in character, operating simultaneously across multiple levels and defying resolution through any single strategic adjustment. At the most fundamental structural level, US assistance has been characterised by a persistent and damaging imbalance between military solutions and the governance reforms that are equally necessary for sustainable stabilisation. While programmes implemented through AFRICOM focused on tactical training, intelligence support, and operational readiness, insurgency in the Sahel has been driven by a combination of political marginalisation, weak state presence in peripheral regions, inter-communal conflict over land and resources, and economic exclusion that military capacity cannot resolve (Thurston, 2020; International Crisis Group, 2020). Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde (1998) explain that the securitisation of a region elevates security institutions while side-lining alternative governance approaches, narrowing the policy space available to both external actors and local governments. In the Sahel, the heavy concentration on military stabilisation consistently overshadowed parallel investments in judicial reform, anti-corruption mechanisms, decentralised governance, and inclusive state-building the structural interventions that address the conditions in which jihadist groups embed themselves and from which they derive their resilience. The result is a strategic imbalance in which coercive capacity is repeatedly reinforced while the foundations of legitimate governance remain fragile and contested.

The financial architecture of US security engagement in the Sahel has produced its own structural vulnerabilities. Unlike the African Peace and Security Architecture's dependence on European Union and UN financing, US assistance operates through Department of Defence appropriations that are inherently subject to shifting legislative priorities and executive branch recalibrations (Williams, 2016). The coup-triggered Section 7008 assistance

suspensions that affected Mali and Burkina Faso during 2021–2022 demonstrated how quickly the continuity of institutional mentoring and capacity-building can be disrupted by political events that are themselves partly a product of the governance deficits that external assistance has failed to resolve (US Department of State, 2022). This structural vulnerability is compounded by the 'donor dependency' dynamic identified in the broader security assistance literature: Sahelian militaries that rely heavily on external logistical, intelligence, and financial support for effective counter-terror operations develop institutional cultures oriented toward external provision rather than autonomous capability generation, creating fragile security architectures that degrade rapidly when partnership continuity is interrupted (De Coning, 2018; Engel and Porto, 2009).

Closely linked to the structural challenge of governance neglect is the persistent and deepening political contradiction at the heart of US counter-terrorism engagement: the tension between normative commitments to democratic governance and accountability, and the strategic imperative to maintain security partnerships in politically fragile states. US foreign policy rhetoric has consistently emphasised democracy promotion, civilian protection, and human rights compliance as core values. Yet the operational logic of counter-terrorism assistance which prioritises security partner reliability, intelligence access, and operational basing rights creates strong incentives to overlook governance failures, corruption within security forces, and democratic backsliding in partner states. This contradiction is not abstract: it was operationalized in the decision to continue intensive security cooperation with Malian and Burkinabe governments whose institutional weaknesses were well-documented, and whose security forces were simultaneously receiving US training and accumulating allegations of human rights abuses. When those forces eventually intervened in politics, the policy response suspension of assistance under Section 7008 represented a belated normative correction that disrupted the very institutional relationships on which the security partnership had been built. The International Crisis Group (2020) argues that this pattern reflects a deeper structural flaw: counter-

terrorism assistance designed to produce security gains in the short term without investing in the governance reforms necessary to sustain those gains over time will inevitably reproduce the political conditions from which instability emerges.

Operational and institutional constraints further compound these structural challenges. Many Sahelian armed forces continued to struggle with logistical weaknesses, maintenance capability deficits, poor command-and-control infrastructure, and pervasive procurement corruption that limited the absorptive capacity for external training and equipment (International Crisis Group, 2020). Even where tactical training genuinely improved unit-level performance, broader institutional deficiencies undermined operational sustainability. Intelligence coordination presented persistent challenges: although US support improved surveillance capabilities through Air Base 201's ISR operations, fragmented inter-agency communication within partner states limited the translation of intelligence into sustained stabilisation outcomes, and insurgent groups demonstrated the operational sophistication to exploit coordination gaps. The introduction of Russian-linked security actors in Mali from late 2021 created direct tensions with Western security frameworks, reducing interoperability, undermining human rights compliance oversight, and complicating the regional security architecture that had been painstakingly constructed over the preceding decade. At the same time, the geographic expansion of jihadist activity into coastal West African states including Togo, Benin, Ghana, and Côte d'Ivoire by 2022 illustrated that the containment objective of US engagement had not been achieved and that the frontier of the security crisis was actively shifting beyond the operational theatre in which US assistance was concentrated.

The crisis of legitimacy both for US counter-terrorism assistance and for the Sahelian states it supports constitutes perhaps the most consequential challenge for the long-term effectiveness of any external engagement strategy. The persistent perception that AU and Western-backed counter-terrorism missions are externally designed and externally financed undermines their legitimacy in the eyes of the very communities whose

cooperation is essential for sustainable security. Adebajo (2011) observed in the African peacekeeping context that external funding inevitably translates into political leverage, shaping mission mandates, operational priorities, and exit strategies in ways that reflect donor interests rather than purely local developmental needs. In the Sahelian counter-terrorism context, the same dynamic applies: communities in peripheral regions of Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso that have experienced decades of state neglect have no inherent reason to trust externally funded and externally designed security operations more than they trust the jihadist groups that, in some areas, have positioned themselves as alternative providers of dispute resolution, protection, and basic order. Research on counter-insurgency dynamics consistently demonstrates that civilian perceptions of legitimacy are more powerful determinants of long-term security outcomes than tactical military effectiveness (Biddle, Friedman, and Shapiro, 2012). A counter-terrorism strategy that succeeds in killing militants while failing to rebuild the social contract between peripheral communities and the central state is not merely incomplete it is potentially counterproductive, generating the grievances that sustain insurgent recruitment and perpetuate the cycle of violence.

Conclusions

The Sahel region has been confronted with series and protracted challenges which have constrained its socio-economic and political development. Insecurity and violence crises resulting from jihadist violence and reoccurrence of insurgency and banditry have been prominent, particularly during the period that was reviewed. Many of the Sahelian countries became helpless in the face of the excruciating security challenges coupled with the inadequate technological and financial capacities to respond to the scourge. The situation further gave opportunity for the superpowers meddlesomeness and exposing the sub-region into superpower competitions. As part of her global outreach strategy and international hegemonic activities, the United States made advances towards military assistance for the Sahel

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region. The advancement was further necessitated by the September 11 attacks where the US experienced a calamitous terrorist attacks on the Pentagon and the World Trade Centre simultaneously. The need to curtail and exterminate terrorism across the globe became very paramount in the US security policy and attention was directed at volatile terrorists' haven including the Sahel region. Different modes of counter-terrorism assistances were provided for the Sahel region. These assistances failed to yield the expected results in terms of suppressing terrorist activities within the region during the period under. This failure is attributed to a number of factors which borders on poor governance and extreme socio-economic problems which made the populace to be prone to terrorism. Whilst international assistances and collaborations towards counter-terrorism in the sub-region are acknowledged, efforts must also be geared towards alleviating socio-economic sufferings of the populace in order to suppress terrorist activities.

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