

HOW JIHADIST GROUPS TAKE ADVANTAGE OF POROUS BORDERS IN WEST AFRICA

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About the Author

Marco Fais is a trained analyst and information management specialist with over 25 years of experience in major international organizations and agencies such as the United Nations, North Atlantic Treaty Organization, Interpol, Europol, Frontex, and Schengen. He has worked extensively in Asia, Africa, and Eastern Europe, dealing with complex and sensitive issues related to organized crime and terrorism. He also studied and lived in six European Union Member States, acquiring a deep knowledge of the European context and culture. He holds six academic titles in various fields, including international relations, terrorism, law, and information technology. He is passionate about artificial intelligence and its implications for law enforcement and counter-terrorism efforts.

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Abstract

The re-establishment of security within the semi-desert areas that span across the entire Sahel is difficult due to the scarce population that is distributed through a myriad of villages and hamlets. This difficulty is compounded by a high porosity of the borders, both intra-Sahelian and extra-Sahelian. The difficulty in managing the border is not only a security or political issue but is also a socio-cultural one, driven by communities that have lived in the area for centuries without concern about borders while trading and smuggling goods across countries. The policies put in place by the G5 Sahel countries (Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, Niger) for eradicating the phenomenon of terrorism from the region seem inadequate when the role of securitization is taken by a single country. The ubiquitous nature of armed groups that plan their attacks in one country, deliver them in a second country, and retreat in a third country, requires a joint response from all member countries, and if available, support of multinational initiatives present in the Sahel. Most attacks, kidnappings, and sightings of armed groups are recorded in border areas. Armed groups exploit the borders strategically by taking advantage of border lines that have been traced without regard to natural landscape or demarcation, which extend for thousands of kilometers. Countries south of the Sahel are ill-equipped to face the terrorist threat and offer limited counter-terrorism support to Sahelian countries. These countries, however, will most likely be the target of armed groups in the coming years.

Of particular concern are the areas where several countries' borders converge to form the so-called tri-borders. These have been particularly vulnerable areas that offer many options to armed groups to shelter and regroup.

Border Areas

Unlike the Middle East Region where terrorists plan and execute their attacks within swathes of the country that they hold or contest, the Sahel is afflicted by trans-border or transnational terrorism.¹ This is a trait that is in the DNA of many indigenous African militants who reject borders because they were created by former colonies.² It is in the nature of the indigenous people to consider Africa as a borderless nation. In addition, the people of the Sahel routinely practice transhumance and nomadism and have traveled across Africa for millennia.

Al-Qaeda- or ISIS-associated groups and other armed extremists active in the Sahel operate in one country, take refuge in a second, and stock up on necessities and arms in a third country because porous borders allow them to do so.³

Most of the recorded terrorist attacks occurred in the border areas of the Sahel from 2015-2020. Kidnappings also took place in the Sahel and neighboring countries in the same period. Hostages were abducted in one country and subsequently transferred to another country. This has happened in Benin,⁴ Nigeria,⁵ Burkina Faso,⁶ Niger,⁷ and Mali.⁸ An American national was kidnapped in a village outside the town of Birnin Konni on the Nigerien border with Nigeria. Nigerien authorities believe that the hostage was taken to Nigeria.⁹ The border between Mali and Niger has been the theatre of similar kidnappings and the subsequent transfer of hostages over the border.¹⁰ In June 2020, members of the delegation of the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue were kidnapped in central Mali and then transported to the border with Burkina Faso.¹¹

In 2011, kidnappings took place, especially at the border between Niger and Tunisia,¹² or Mauritania,¹³ and the hostages were subsequently transported to northern Mali. Similarly, during this period, there was no Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (IS-GS) or Al-Qa'ida in the Lands of the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) militancy in Mali,¹⁴ although some jihadis' training camps were functioning in the country.¹⁵ Therefore, the role of Mali was one of support and sanctuary, a safe haven to take hostages with minimal risk of being detected and prosecuted by the authorities. What was happening about 10 years ago in Mali may be a premonition of what may come in the future for some southwestern African countries that have, so far, been left almost untouched by the various insurgencies and terrorist attacks. The security situation in these countries may deteriorate just as it did in Mali and Niger during the last six years. The worsening security situation in Mali and Niger is the result of terrorist groups being expelled from Algeria and Mauritania after 2010.¹⁶

Borders are also where different armed groups, with different agendas, meet. Some groups at the border may be intent on smuggling goods, weapons, people, or drugs. Bandits, commuters, migrants, nomads, and pastoralists, along with terrorist groups, all gravitate close to border areas. This suggests that among some of these groups, there are unwritten agreements that allow them to survive and, sometimes, to lend support to one another.

Government forces that operate exclusively under the framework of national laws and limit their scope to their own territorial jurisdictions have no hope of curbing the problems that armed groups cause in the Sahel. Extraterritorial pursuits are possible thanks to multilateral agreements signed by the Sahelian countries plus Sudan, Cameroon, Nigeria,

Togo, Ghana, and Benin, but are not frequently encountered in bilateral agreements or customary international law. Consequently, an unofficial border crossing is likely to enable militants to evade capture and therefore prosecution. This may result in countries carrying out operations without notifying their counterparts. Armies in pursuit of terrorist groups are known to have crossed the borders of neighboring countries legally. For instance, the Malian government has allowed Mauritanian troops to conduct operations in Malian territory. The exception is Algeria which has opposed operations from other governments in its territory.¹⁷ Mali has signed an agreement with Niger, allowing the Nigerien army to continue in pursuit up to 50 km from the border in Malian territory without prior notice.¹⁸ Conversely, in 2019, Niger withdrew its permission to allow foreign armies to enter its sovereign territory.¹⁹ Another example of security cooperation is the agreement signed in 2018 by Niger, Chad, Sudan, and the Libyan Government of National Accord, which includes a right of pursuit of its own forces into any of the signatories' territory. Chad had already signed a bilateral agreement with Sudan in 2010.²⁰ This murky regulatory landscape is exploited by AQIM, which operates in border regions, attacking in one jurisdiction before fleeing to another jurisdiction.²¹ Sahelian states often alert southern coastal states like Ghana, Benin, Togo, and Ivory Coast of crossings by extremists into their jurisdictions to avoid arrest. A concrete example comes from the 2019 Otapuana operation in southern Burkina Faso and Ghana, where extremists were believed to be hiding in the north of Ghana.²² Some of the West African coastal states' security structures lack counterterrorism training and have limited capabilities to detect or intercept terrorists entering their countries.²³ Therefore, they would be unable to reciprocate Sahelian countries' services²⁴ or provide advance warnings.

The borders are the center of interest of many groups, including armed non-state actors, the population, and the states themselves. While the needs of the population largely coincide with those of the state, especially in the restoration of areas of safe transit, their main objective is not exclusively security but also the ability to make a living from trafficking goods and people across borders.²⁵ The strategies of closed borders and strict controls put in place by local governments may not be sufficient to combat organized crime. These applied strategies risk only impacting small communities whose members obtain their livelihoods from small-scale, unregulated trade.²⁶

Intra-Sahelian borders

Control of border areas by militant groups is important because these groups grant control of smuggling routes, allowing the borders to become hubs where organized crime groups collude with terrorist groups. Characteristically, in April 2020, the Macina Liberation Front (FLM) guided by Amadou Koufa,²⁷ engaged in violent battles with IS-GS in Bora and Dialloubé, circle of Douenza, Mopti Region, Mali. This battle may have been generated by a dispute over control of the area, including the criminal activities therein. During the battles, IS-GS received reinforcements originating from the province of Soum, Burkina Faso, and the FLM received reinforcements from Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) within the Mopti region. It seems that, on this occasion, the balance of power was in favor of the FLM.²⁸

Because it is between Mali and Nigeria, Niger occupies the most precarious position.²⁹ Additionally, the security situation in Niger and Chad is deteriorating. Apart from its proximity to Niger, Chad is facing a growing southern-born threat by Boko Haram from Cameroon and Nigeria. It is also threatened by the worsening security situation in the neighboring Central African Republic.³⁰

Illegal border crossings between Mali and Mauritania are likely to take place through the region of Segou. In June 2020, wounded militants were seen in search of medicines in Fassala, Mauritania, 2.8 km from the border with Mali in an area called Auzou. Their wounds are thought to be the consequences of a battle against the Malian army that took place in Bouka-wèrè on 14 June 2020.³¹ This particular battle cost the lives of 27 soldiers and caused the loss of 9 vehicles.³² Earlier in the year, the AQIM wanted to divert its forces and open another front close to Mauritania. Its goal was to ease the pressure caused by government forces which at that time were gaining momentum in the Liptako-Gourma region.³³ However, despite the number of attacks that followed in the province of Segou, west of Mali, close to Mauritania, the conflict never escalated beyond the border.

In Lake Chad, which marks the borders between Chad, Niger, and Cameroon, the jihadists have combined the agility of the motorcycle with the carriage capability of motorized pirogues and canoes, which are used to transport up to twelve motorcycles per canoe. They also exploit the cover that is offered by the meanders and marshes of the lake and its dense vegetation to remain undetected until they ambush security forces and steal their assets from the vessels.

With regard to intra-Sahelian arms trafficking, the main demand is from Mali and Burkina Faso. On the other hand, Niger has been considered a transit country, however, in the last two years, demand from Niger has also increased.

The types of attacks that take place along all borders of the G5 Sahel countries (Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger) are not only carried out by terrorist groups. Some of the intra-communal raids that have been recorded along the Niger-Mali border are attributed to fractions of what can be generically defined as farmers and herders-nomads. These disputes or attacks involve members of village communities situated within the border of Niger attacking village communities situated on the other side of the border in Mali, or vice versa.³⁴ These attacks have triggered an endless chain of retaliatory attacks that aggravate the security situation in the region by adding to the pressure from terrorist groups.

Movement of persons within Sahelian countries takes place under the aegis of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). The legal framework underpinning ECOWAS replicates those of the European Union and the Schengen Agreement. The goal, therefore, is that the movement of people in the Sahel should take place with minimum formalities, assuming that those who are already present in this space have gained access legally. Unfortunately, porous borders and the massive presence of illegal traffickers and people-smugglers make this inference false.³⁵ Malian counterfeit passports are often sought by many West African migrants willing to travel to the ECOWAS nations. These passports are obtained via a Malian identity card which only requires a Malian birth certificate that mentions 'Malian nationality.'³⁶ Such certificates do not bear security features and that could be in some instances forged. Sometimes, these types of passports are also rented. Once individuals reach their destination, the passports are sent back to Mali for reuse.³⁷

Liptako-Gourma

The Liptako-Gourma region, also known as the Sahel Tri-Border area, is a complicated environment that deserves specific analysis. This region, which encompasses Burkina Faso, Nigerien, and Malian territories, hosts a multitude of heterogeneous and very active jihadist militant groups. It is a common problem that defines these three countries. This southern region constitutes a second front for Mali, given that the north of the country has been affected since the beginning of the crisis. Violence is now spreading south within Mali and even in neighboring countries. This polarization of the front, intercalated by pockets of relative security in Burkina Faso, Niger, and Mali, makes the security effort more complicated.

The region has been under the influence of armed groups since at least 2012.³⁸ In January 2013, French-Malian contingents intervened with the French-led Operation Serval³⁹ which was ultimately replaced by Operation Barkhane. Operation Barkhane restored control of the territories to the Malian government, but the operation formally ended in November 2022.

Between 2013 and 2022 there was a shift of power and associated control over the region because the French-driven operation units temporarily pushed out the militants. The militants fought back, inflicting heavy losses on the Sahelian government forces and French army personnel.⁴⁰ In 2020, the international coalition managed to reduce the capabilities of the IS-GS in Liptako-Gourma, due to a renewed effort made possible by the large-scale mobilization of Chadian contingents in the region and the subsequent establishment of mixed French-Sahelian units.⁴¹

Control over this region is contested between government forces and terrorist groups because it is of extreme strategic importance for the terrorists. The Liptako-Gourma region offers the best example of a terrorist sanctuary because it ensures cover, safety, and access to smuggling routes, communication hubs, and large urban centers. For the terrorists, losing control over this region would mean losing the whole war against the local governments. The region is important not only for the Sahel but also for the stability of all southwestern Sub-Saharan countries, including the West African coastal states of Togo, Benin, and Ghana.

This region is put under pressure by several groups: umbrella organizations such as the Islamic State and al-Qaeda are present in the region as well as other organizations like Boko Haram, which are not predominantly based in Sahelian countries.⁴²

Eastern Borders

Sahelian countries also face the threat of attacks from groups that are based outside the boundaries of the Sahel region. These groups cross borders, carry out attacks, and then retreat abroad again. In September 2020, in Kouri Bougoudi, Chad, a commando of a Sudanese militia called Toros-Boros attacked a Chadian army base, killing one and wounding another member of the Agency of National Security.⁴³ Armed groups that operate in Sudan may in the future pose a greater threat to the Sahelian countries because of the push factor of the crises in Eritrea and Ethiopia,⁴⁴ and the potential spill-overs from other

troubled countries in the region, including the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the Central African Republic.

Northern Borders

The initial enhancement in the firepower of terrorist groups took place in Mali in 2011, followed by a similar occurrence a few months later in Niger. This development, which coincided with the Libyan civil war, significantly strengthened AQIM, enabling it to augment its military capabilities by acquiring weapons that were previously uncommon or scarce in the region.⁴⁵ Since that time, the southern region of Libya has been used by terrorists that are fighting in Niger and Chad as a base to regroup and re-arm.⁴⁶ Similar scenarios can be seen east, west, and south of the Sahel. Libya shares borders with Algeria, Niger, and Chad in the desert region of Murzuq. Gatum and several other small towns in this region are important smuggling routes for both people and goods. With the political and military crisis that has been affecting Libya since 2011, law enforcement is virtually nonexistent in the area. The greatest risk that traffickers incur is banditry in the desert. Travelers that intend to reach Libya expose themselves to much higher security risks when they pass through Arlit, Niger and then continue through Algeria. It is significantly less dangerous to travel directly from Arlit to Libya, avoiding transiting through Algeria.⁴⁷

Sometimes, the militants move across the Sahara in geographically difficult areas. The treacherous paths within these areas can be walked or ridden but are seldom completed by vehicles. Consequently, there are fewer security patrols or defense forces. There could be high peaks similar to those of the Ahaggar Mountains in southern Algeria, the Adrars in Mali, and the Iron Mountains in Niger.⁴⁸ The border's importance was further demonstrated in October 2020. After lengthy and complex negotiations between the Malian government and JNIM, JNIM freed four European hostages in exchange for the release of 206 jihadists by the Malian government.⁴⁹

In this context, two things prove that the porous borders of the Sahelian states play an important part in the geopolitical dynamics of the region: First, despite the apparent opposition of Algeria to the negotiations,⁵⁰ some of the ransom paid during the deal was found by the Algerian army in Algeria.⁵¹ Second, at least some of the jihadists who were freed as part of the deal⁵² made their way to Algeria where they were subsequently arrested.⁵³ Some of these terrorists, who were released in Mali, have engaged in battles with the Algerian army and were either neutralized or arrested. They included Rezkane Ahcene, a terrorist that Algiers described as "very dangerous".⁵⁴

A known crossing for smuggling and jihadists is the corridor from Gao, Mali that crosses into Algeria near Borj Mokhtar and continues to Tamanrasset. This route necessitates cutting into the desert, which takes a few days, but it allows groups to bypass the border posts to enter Algeria clandestinely. Malians do not need a visa to enter Algeria; therefore, when encountering border posts, illicit actors may simply use counterfeit passports.⁵⁵ In 2013, Algeria closed its 2,000 km-long borders with Niger and Mali, invoking terrorism reasons. The closure has had heavy consequences for trade, generating illegal smuggling routes between Algeria and Niger, and between Algeria and Mali. These same

routes can be exploited by terrorist groups. One of the routes that is currently used to smuggle fuel and food from Algeria to Mali and Niger is the Tin Amzi Valley and the Niger or Anou Mellen, Mali. The route continues southwest to Menaka, Kidal, and Gao, Mali. There is also an alternate route, which runs through the Algerian border towns of Tinzaouatine and Timiaouine and the village of Bordji Badji Mokhtar.⁵⁶

Southern Borders

The porosity of the Sahel's southern borders is best explained by citing that Nigeria alone has 1,497 irregular and 84 regular routes for movements of people and groups engaged in a range of illegal activities willing to reach the Sahel.⁵⁷

Militants normally cross the borders illegally or cross at an unofficial border crossing. Occasionally, they use the official border gates where they are sufficiently confident of encountering minimal scrutiny by the authorities. For example, they choose to cross the border during periods of increased commuter volume when there is less stringent control at understaffed checkpoints. This includes market days or cattle fairs, which allow the smugglers to blend in with the local population.⁵⁸ Stolen livestock from Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger, is often sold below market prices on behalf of terrorist groups at sales points in Benin, Ivory Coast, and Ghana. The money obtained from this trade is then used to acquire weaponry, fuel, food, and motorbikes.⁵⁹

To a certain extent, most armed groups in Mali have received weapons originating from Guinea. Such weapons consist of a gamut of obsolete —yet still functional— firearms from the conflicts in Sierra Leone and Liberia, and weapons from the Guinean army, which have been diverted to equip Malian jihadist groups.⁶⁰

Foreign-based groups attack Sahelian countries either to target their authorities or to fight rival groups that are based in them. Similarly, Sahelian-based groups are becoming a major threat to the security of the coastal states south of the Sahel. The focus of terrorist attacks, especially by Boko Haram, has followed mainly two paths. A north-bound focus, originating from northeast Nigeria, towards the Lake Chad Basin,⁶¹ and an eastward focus, from Mali to Burkina Faso. If this shift continues, Sahelian-based terrorist groups will increasingly threaten West African coastal states.⁶² The Gulf of Guinea is within the reach of militant groups. If their push southward continues, this region may experience a similar situation to what Somalia has experienced for the last 20 years.⁶³

The Central African Republic shares borders with Chad. Weapons from Libya may have been smuggled to the Central African Republic, at relatively the same time they reached Chad. In May 2020, Burkina Faso and Ivory Coast carried out a joint counterterrorist operation at their borders with the main objective of locating and removing jihadis from the area. The operation was carried out in response to the detection of activities that may have been linked to terrorism.⁶⁴ The operation resulted in the neutralization of eight presumed terrorists and the arrest of another 38. Because Benin, Togo, Ghana, Cameroon, and Ivory Coast contribute troops to the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali⁶⁵ (MINUSMA), these countries may be at risk since insurgents and terrorist groups may use it as a pretext to attack them.

Countries that do not share borders with the Sahel region, such as Angola, may face the same threats as countries that do, like Benin, Togo, Cameroon, Nigeria, and the Ivory Coast. The main threat is the expansion of terrorist organizations into their territory. The escalation of attacks in southern Burkina Faso translates into marking the north of the Ivory Coast as a red zone. The same applies to Togo, where infiltration of terrorist cells from Burkina Faso is already taking place. Terrorist groups expand into neighboring countries to diffuse international efforts by diversifying their targets and opening new fronts. Countries that are unprepared to become new fronts turn into safe havens and need to pay, according to their credo, the price of participating in the multidimensional integrated United Nations mission to stabilize Mali, such as Togo and the Ivory Coast.⁶⁶

Terrorist groups routinely declare their enemies in public statements or make their targets known in publications. Iyad Ag Ghaly, the leader of JNIM, has listed 11 countries as enemies. Apart from some European countries and the United States, his list included Burkina Faso, Chad, Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, Niger, and Senegal.⁶⁷

Safe Corridors

Safe corridors, in the logic of terrorism, are paths of least resistance for the terrorist groups, in their movements across the Sahel. The resistance in this case is put up by government forces, international coalition forces, or foreign armies. These corridors are vital for the terrorists because, apart from allowing them to travel virtually freely, they grant them access to a supply of goods and commodities that are not available locally, such as fuel, weapons, vehicles, medicine, and occasionally food. By disrupting these corridors, a state entity would deny them access to the vital flow of supplies, thus weakening their movements and autonomy.

Safe corridors are not necessarily fast routes. The 700 km-long border between Nigeria and Benin and the border between Benin and the Ivory Coast are crammed with wild vegetation, forests, and swamps that provide an opportunity for concealment but necessitate slower movement.⁶⁸

In 2019, IS-GS opened a corridor from northern Mali to northwestern Nigeria and northern Benin with a passage through the Nigerian town of Dogondoutchi.⁶⁹ The administration of Dogondoutchi faced numerous attacks in 2019, but there are no available records of attacks in 2020 or 2021.⁷⁰

There may be a correlation between the opening of safe corridors by the terrorists and the eviction of civilians from villages and hamlets, or even the killings of civilians. As discussed earlier, the corridors are needed by the terrorists to ensure a safe passage between specific locations. They do not aim to establish presence or take control of the villages that happen to lie along these corridors. In fact, all buildings or huts are burned or destroyed. It is possible that they aim to erase these villages from the map. By removing the administrative entities, they remove the need for the presence of authorities, including those of the military and law enforcement. The latter would not feel obliged to safeguard the security of uninhabited areas. Therefore, these evictions and massacres, rather than being

simply barbaric acts, may be calculated steps toward medium- to long-term strategic objectives. The targets of these attacks are not large towns or cities. They are usually villages or hamlets with a maximum of a few hundred inhabitants. These are easier to evacuate and, tragically, easier to raze, making sure that those evicted from them do not return.

Between October 2020 and April 2021, IS-GS and Boko Haram carried out a series of attacks on villages around the region of Tillabéri and Diffa,⁷¹ Niger.⁷² Some sources report that various other groups, including Nusrat al-Islam (JNIM) and Ansarul ul Islam, may have been involved too.⁷³ Their modus operandi was to reveal their intention to wipe out the villages from the map by expelling or killing those who did not leave. This campaign partially coincided with a political election in Niger, an event that was a cause of concern for the government because, typically, elections are marked by a parallel increase in attacks by armed groups. IS-GS was suspected of being behind these attacks on the villages of Kiomabangou, Zaroumadey,⁷⁴ Tchoma Bangou, Zaroumadareye,⁷⁵ and many others, while Boko Haram was suspected of being behind the attacks of Toumour, Zinder.⁷⁶ No groups claimed responsibility for the attacks in Kouré, a resort center not far from Niamey,⁷⁷ or in Inatès, a military camp,⁷⁸ and many others.

Plotting these attacks on a map (see *Figure 1*) reveals that the locations of these events draw a path from Tillabéri towards eastern Niger, which may mean that the long-term objective could be to create a corridor between Lake Chad and the Border with Mali and Burkina Faso.

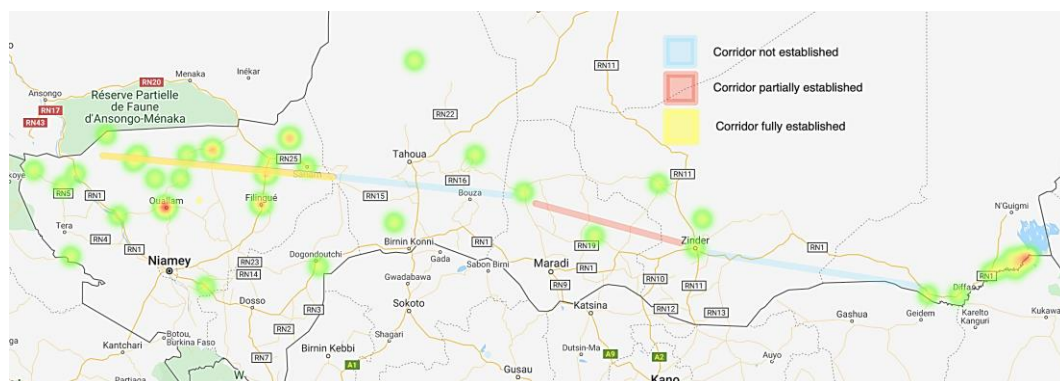


Figure 1: Map representing the location of attacks occurred in 2022. The distance of a hypothetical corridor between the most westerly edge of Niger and Lake Chad is of 1,400 km.

If this hypothesis is true, then villages situated in the departments of Mainé-Soroa, west of Diffa, in the Diffa region, Illela, and Tahoua, may be at high risk in the coming months. This is a scarcely populated region, with small villages and hamlets, which are difficult to service and police, thus ideal for a clearing strategy. Notably, together with Agadez, this area represents 80 percent of the region's territory but hosts only 3 percent of its population.⁷⁹ The opening of this corridor would not simply allow freedom of movement for the terrorists but would also bridge three or more countries in the region. Such maneuvers by the terrorist groups must be put under a wide regional lens.

Air Borders

Terrorists could theoretically travel by air in the Sahel without many difficulties. Most of the Sahel is not covered by radar, except for the areas within reach of airports or military bases. Small airplanes can find safe routes to various locations without incurring the risk of being detected by the authorities in Kidal, Tessali, Niore, Mali, and the surrounding desert areas.⁸⁰ Malian drug traffickers, allegedly linked to al-Qaeda, are suspected to have established links with drug traffickers from South America. These traffickers have given them access to international and intra-Sahel flights aboard private airplanes.⁸¹ During the trial of this case by a United States court, it emerged that an alleged South American drug lord was a United States undercover agent. The suspects denied being linked to al-Qaeda, however, this may have been a strategy of the defense team for not aggravating their situation.⁸²

Things slightly change towards the Mauritanian-Malian border, where, despite the inability to ensure coverage of all borders, the Mauritanian Airforce has been using United States-donated Cessna surveillance planes, Brazilian Super Tucanos, and a few Chinese assault helicopters. Together, these allow the Mauritanian authorities to detect suspicious aircraft traffic and ground vehicle movement.⁸³ It is also possible that some militants wanting to cross the Mediterranean Sea from the Sahel or North Africa can travel using a 'clean' passport to Europe.⁸⁴

It is worth noting that the Global Terrorism Index ranks Mali 11th, Burkina Faso 12th, Niger 24th, Chad 34th, and Mauritania 135th in the world.⁸⁵

On one side, there is relative confidence that foreign terrorist fighters will not attempt to enter the Sahelian country via direct international flights, however, on the other side, the security of air travel must be put in perspective with the realities of the Sahel. The most important counterbalance to this security is the existence of porous borders. Foreign terrorist fighters do not need to reach Sahelian countries. They need to successfully disembark from a plane in Abidjan or Accra, where the risk of detection will be negligible. Ivory Coast is ranked 80th and Ghana 82nd in the world by the Global Terrorism Index.⁸⁶

There have been attempts to reach Mali via airplane from remote locations such as the United States and Pakistan. In 2019, Pakistani immigration authorities at the Allama Iqbal International Airport in Lahore arrested a suspected foreign fighter, who had a fake visa and was on his way to Mali via Istanbul.⁸⁷ Still, in 2019, when pressure on terror groups was mounting in Syria and Iraq, many foreign fighters were trying to escape through neutral countries such as Egypt, by returning to their country of origin or by reaching other conflict areas, such as Libya, Chad, Mali, and Algeria.⁸⁸ Algeria, and possibly Libya, were transitory countries in journeys to conflict areas.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Terrorist groups in West Africa see the laws governing borders as immaterial. This perception is also widespread in large portions of African societies, not only in West Africa. These laws are, in the narrative of terrorists and partly in the opinion of many local community

members, an imposition from the former colonizers who are working in collusion with the corrupt local governments. The authorities of West African countries manage official border crossing points with inconsistent methodologies and resources. However, this is not the foremost problem. The foremost problem is that the official crossing points do not capture the principal movements of people, illegal goods, and weapons, which transit daily across countries through unofficial border crossings. These points are not manageable and are not controllable by the authorities, at least with the current laws and means available to them.

Another major problem is the lack of real cooperation in the domain of multinational border management. The latter needs to be backed up by multilateral or international laws that would allow for a certain elasticity and mutual permissibility of action of agents from foreign authorities, especially when the latter are engaged in pursuits of illicit actors.

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