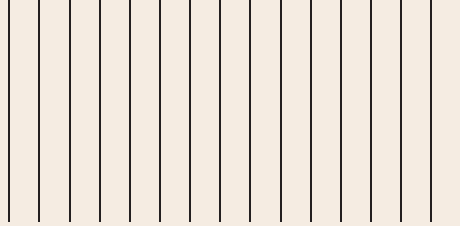


# WEST AFRICAN PAPERS



## MILITARY COUPS, JIHADISM AND INSECURITY IN THE CENTRAL SAHEL





# WEST AFRICAN PAPERS



## MILITARY COUPS, JIHADISM AND INSECURITY IN THE CENTRAL SAHEL

APRIL 2024, NO. 43

Alexander Thurston  
School of International Affairs,  
University of Cincinnati

# WEST AFRICAN PAPERS

The West African Papers series explores African socio-economic, political and security transformations, their interactions and their effects. Intended for an audience of experts, researchers and decision makers, they aim to stimulate discussion and inform policy. The papers are available in English and/or French and can be downloaded from: <https://doi.org/10.1787/24142026>.

Please cite this work as:

Thurston, A. (2024), "Military Coups, jihadism and insecurity in the Central Sahel", Sahel and West Africa Club (SWAC/OECD), *West African Papers*, No. 43, OECD Publishing, Paris.

<https://doi.org/10.1787/24142026>

OECD Working Papers should not be reported as representing the official views of the OECD or of its member countries. The opinions expressed and arguments employed are those of the authors. Working Papers describe preliminary results or research in progress by the author(s) and are published to stimulate discussion on a broad range of issues on which the OECD works. Comments on Working Papers are welcomed and may be sent to SWAC/OECD, 2 rue André-Pascal, 75775 Paris Cedex 16.

This document, as well as any data and map included herein, are without prejudice to the status of or sovereignty over any territory, to the delimitation of international frontiers and boundaries and to the name of any territory, city or area.

Authorised for publication by Sibiri Jean Zoundi, Director (acting), Sahel and West Africa Club Secretariat (SWAC/OECD).

© **OECD 2024**

The use of this work, whether digital or print, is governed by the terms and conditions to be found at <http://www.oecd.org/termsandconditions/>.

## Abstract

This paper examines the interactions between the 2020-23 Sahelian coups and the trajectories of jihadism and insecurity, covering three countries: Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger. First, it examines pre-coup trends in violence. Second, the paper finds that coup-makers' policy choices have accelerated the worsening of violence beyond the pre-coup baseline trend, especially when coup-makers authorise new actors to commit violence, although trends in violence remain somewhat erratic and are even more complex at the sub-national level. Third, it offers an ambivalent finding on the impact of the withdrawal of the French Operation Barkhane following Mali's second coup in 2021. Finally, the paper discusses the apparent strategies of the region's two main jihadist groups, which have largely continued their pre-coup strategies, but have also responded to new conflict actors and pursued certain opportunities for increased territorial influence.

**Key words:** Sahel, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, ECOWAS, jihadism, coups, violence.

**JEL classification:** D74, F50, F51, Q34

## About the author

**Alexander Thurston** is Associate Professor in the School of Public and International Affairs at the University of Cincinnati. He is the author of three books, most recently *Jihadists of North Africa and the Sahel: Local Politics and Rebel Groups* (Cambridge University Press, 2020).

## Note to readers

This work is carried out under the memorandum of understanding between SWAC/OECD and the Sahel Research Group at the University of Florida. This collaboration aims to reinforce ties between research and policies in order to better anticipate changes in the Sahel and West Africa and promote West African expertise by strengthening links with African researchers and research centres. The opinions expressed in this note are those of the author and do not engage the responsibility of SWAC/OECD.

## THE SAHEL AND WEST AFRICA CLUB

The Sahel and West Africa Club (SWAC) is an international platform whose Secretariat is hosted by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). SWAC/OECD produces and maps data, provides informed analyses and facilitates strategic dialogue, to help better anticipate transformations in the region and their territorial impacts. Through its retrospective and prospective approach, it promotes more contextualised policies as levers for regional integration, sustainable development and stability. Its areas of work include food dynamics, urbanisation, climate and security.

Its Members and financial partners are AFD (*Agence française de développement*), Austria, Belgium, Canada, CILSS (Permanent Interstate Committee for Drought Control in the Sahel), the ECOWAS (Economic Community of West African States) Commission, the European Commission, GIZ (*Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit*), France, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Spain, Switzerland, the UEMOA (West African Economic and Monetary Union) Commission and the United States.

For more information: [www.oecd.org/swac](http://www.oecd.org/swac)  
<https://mapping-africa-transformations.org>

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

|   |      |
|---|------|
| ● ACRONYMS.....   | P.6  |
| ● EXECUTIVE SUMMARY.....                                      | P.7  |
| ● INTRODUCTION.....   | P.9  |
| ● PRE-COUP AND POST-COUP SECURITY TRENDS.....                 | P.11 |
| - Expanding violence and its political fallout.....           | P.11 |
| - Pre-coup and post-coup fatalities: trends and patterns..... | P.12 |
| - Analysis of fatality trends.....                            | P.15 |
| ● ESCALATORY YET INCONSISTENT COUNTERINSURGENCY POLICIES..... | P.17 |
| ● CAUSES AND IMPACT OF FRANCE'S WITHDRAWAL POLICIES.....      | P.19 |
| - Barkhane's strategic failures.....                          | P.19 |
| - The unfulfilled return of the state.....                    | P.21 |
| ● JIHADIST STRATEGIES.....                                    | P.23 |
| ● PERSPECTIVES.....   | P.24 |
| ● REFERENCES.....   | P.25 |

## ● ACRONYMS

|         |   |
|---------|---|
| ACLED   | Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project                                  |
| AQIM    | Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb   |
| CMA     | Coordination of Movements of Azawad   |
| ECOWAS  | Economic Community of West African States                                       |
| GATIA   | Imghad Tuareg Self-Defence Group and Allies                                     |
| ISGS    | Islamic State in the Greater Sahara   |
| ISWAP   | Islamic State West Africa Province  |
| JNIM    | Jama 'at Nusrat al-Islam wa-l-Muslimin (Group for Supporting Islam and Muslims) |
| MINUSMA | United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali        |
| MSA     | Movement for the Salvation of Azawad  |
| VDP     | Volunteers for the Defence of the Homeland                                      |



## ● EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Sahelian coups of 2020-23 ushered in a new political era for the region and exacerbated the jihadist insurgencies in Mali and Burkina Faso. The latest coup, that in Niger in July 2023, also appears poised to negatively affect security over the long term. Nevertheless, the coups were not a total break with what preceded them. Understanding pre-coup trends is crucial for understanding the impact of the coups on levels of violence—military regimes inherited a bad and worsening situation, which was a large part of the reason coups occurred in the first place. Military regimes then pursued policies that were simultaneously inconsistent and escalatory, leading to increases in violence above what the region would have likely experienced if pre-coup trends had simply continued.

These policies included licensing paramilitaries to commit or to intensify violence. Such paramilitaries include the Kremlin-linked Wagner Group mercenaries operating in Mali, and Burkina Faso's Volunteers for the Defence of the Homeland, a group created before the coups there but expanded by the juntas. Military regimes also squandered crucial peace-making opportunities, particularly in Mali in the period immediately following the August 2020 coup. Across the three countries, increased levels of violence—as demonstrated by the data analysed below—partly reflect violence against civilians by state forces and allies, as well as growing clashes between state forces and jihadists. Although military regimes invoked insecurity to justify coups, these regimes have failed to curb violence.

Meanwhile, French forces exited the central Sahel in stages between 2021 and 2023, amid rising anti-French sentiment among the masses, from certain politicians and civil society figures, and on the part of the new military juntas. As the data analysed in this paper indicate, France's military intervention in 2013 brought a temporary constriction of jihadist activity, as have other military interventions in northwest Africa, but French counterterrorism failed to prevent an increase in violence in the central Sahel, especially from 2015 onwards. It is possible that French counterterrorism held violence to lower levels than would otherwise have been obtained—but the French withdrawal was politically inevitable due to the gap between French counterterrorism "successes" (in terms of assassinating jihadist leaders) and the growing insecurity experienced by ordinary Sahelians, as well as many Sahelians' long-running criticisms of France's overall posture in the Sahel and in Africa.

Amid the French withdrawal, one major trend was the expansion of Islamic State activity in the eastern Malian region of Ménaka, although the Islamic State had an earlier peak of violence there amid French counterterrorism and in some ways because of that counterterrorism. Jihadist advances in Ménaka also partly reflect not merely a security vacuum, but also choices made in Bamako; the Malian military's reconquest of Kidal from northern armed groups in October-November 2023 indicates that the junta has made that zone a higher priority than Ménaka. Adding to the complexity of the situation, violence was higher in Ménaka in 2022 than in 2023, although the drop largely reflects the Islamic State's consolidation of control over much of the region.

For their part, jihadists have mostly maintained their pre-coup strategies, which include largely rural campaigns of violence and an ad hoc and inconsistent geographic expansion, mostly southwards—although full-blown insurgencies have yet to take hold in Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana or Togo, and West African coastal states are experimenting with containment strategies. Within the Sahel itself, jihadists face constraints even amid apparent momentum; they still appear to continue to wrestle with a dilemma that has confronted them elsewhere since the mid-2010s, namely the lesson that holding territory and particularly holding urban territory raises the strong possibility of triggering international intervention in the form of a direct assault on a fixed position. Sahelian jihadists have largely hugged the countryside since the disruption of their state-building project in 2013, and that trend mostly continues to hold.

Jihadists have recently made considerable shows of force against the Malian and Burkinabè armed forces, however, including in major attacks at the Malian military base at Kati in July 2022 and at a military base in the northern Burkina Faso town of Djibo in November 2023. The Islamic State could also eventually pursue an even more overtly territorial project in Ménaka and beyond. Meanwhile, the Wagner presence has provided propaganda opportunities to jihadists, particularly in terms of arguing that they are the vanguard of resistance to foreign occupation.

In light of the above trends, the paper offers a grim assessment of the Central Sahel's medium-term future. The prospect of stable and independent civilian elected authorities taking power seems remote. Malian military authorities have made repeated adjustments to the timetable for transitioning to civilian rule, and other juntas may follow suit. Eventual "transitions" could also prove hollow if military juntas run their own members as candidates or if junta-backed civilian proxies win the transitional elections. There is also substantial potential for further coups, including additional junior officers' coups against senior officers, as occurred in Burkina Faso in September 2022.

Levels of violence will likely remain high throughout 2024 and beyond, and military regimes appear to lack credible plans for containing violence or creating openings for viable dialogue with jihadists or even with conventional rebels. Military regimes can survive physically and politically, however, by ruling over skeletal states that effectively comprise national capitals and various other government-run administrative centres, all while continuing to cede much of the countryside to various armed groups. The paper does not offer any formal recommendations beyond the need to anticipate continued instability and suffering across the Central Sahel, with military regimes likely to remain relatively hostile to Western powers over the medium term. The coming years are likely to be difficult and violent in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger, given the absence of clear inclusive strategies taking into account the multifaceted dimension of the crisis.

## ● INTRODUCTION

Groups of military officers seized power in Mali (August 2020), Burkina Faso (January 2022), and Niger (July 2023). In both Mali and Burkina Faso, the initial coup was followed by a second: in Mali, the junta led by Colonel Assimi Goïta overthrew its own civilian appointees in May 2021, shedding the pretence of a civilian-led transition. In Burkina Faso, Captain Ibrahim Traoré overthrew Colonel Paul-Henry Damiba in September 2022, reflecting grievances among front-line soldiers. In all three countries, juntas have promised transitions to civilian rule, but in practice they have instituted authoritarian rule while keeping transition timetables flexible. Although this paper does not discuss Chad, dynamics there have followed a broadly similar pattern, with the key difference that Chad's April 2021 coup aimed to preserve a dynastic and military-dominated system rather than to replace one regime with another.

The coups in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger fit into a longer history of Sahelian coups (Elischer, 2021<sup>[1]</sup>), but this round occurred amid, and partly in response to, jihadist insurgencies. Those insurgencies were and are imbricated in multi-sided armed conflicts involving not just security forces and jihadists but also external military forces, paramilitaries and mercenaries, communal militias, bandits and others. As governing authorities, the Sahel's juntas inherited insurgencies in which they themselves had already been central actors.

Jihadism in the region dates to the early 2000s. Since the mid-2010s, two jihadist movements have been at the forefront of Sahelian militancy: *Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wa-l-Muslimin* (the Group for Supporting Islam and Muslims, JNIM), which was formed in 2017 as a coalition of Al Qaeda units; and the Islamic State in Greater Sahara (ISGS, later renamed Islamic State Sahel Province, but here referred to as ISGS for simplicity's sake), which formed in 2015 out of a dissident al-Qaida unit. JNIM and ISGS have common roots in Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), which remains JNIM's parent organisation. Another jihadist formation in the region is Burkina Faso's *Ansar al-Islam* (Defenders of Islam), which emerged around 2016 and has been partly under JNIM's wing. Jihadist insurgencies have fuelled chaos and suffering in the Sahel (OECD/SWAC, 2020<sup>[2]</sup>), including the displacement of over three million people within Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger.

In all three countries, military juntas promised to restore security and defeat jihadists, yet as the data below suggest, insecurity has increased in Mali and Burkina Faso and may increase in Niger as well. Additionally, citing populist and nationalist appeals to sovereignty, juntas have halted military co-operation with France, whose forces were waging the main anti-jihadist campaign in the Sahel between 2013 and 2022. France's withdrawal may have empowered jihadists, although this paper will offer some nuance when considering that impact. Other components of the Sahel's security architecture have also been dismantled due to either hostility from the juntas and/or to Western governments' legal and policy restrictions on working with military regimes. Affected institutions include the United Nations' Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), the European Union Training Mission in Mali, and some bilateral security assistance to Sahelian states from the United States and other Western powers.

The Sahel is worse off since the coups, even as measured against pre-coup trendlines. The negative impact of the coups can be seen in terms of declining political space, human rights, civic freedoms, and everyday security; the economic fallout of coups and sanctions also slowed recovery from the effects of COVID-19, which had in turn hit an already impoverished Sahel. Yet some analysts depict the pre-coup period as one of relative stability under civilian rule and French counterterrorism operations. For example, an infographic by the Africa Center for Strategic Studies (2023<sup>[3]</sup>) foregrounds post-coup violence but neglects to emphasise that security trends were worsening in the pre-coup period as well. Or for another example, testimony to the United States Congress argued that in Mali, "increased insecurity can be directly linked to the August 2022 withdrawal of French forces operating under the Operation Barkhane counterinsurgency mission" and that "France at the very least was managing the situation in hopes that a future easing of the political tempest would facilitate a more sustainable resolution" (Zelin, 2023<sup>[3]</sup>).

A fine-grained look at the data, however, suggests that levels of violence since the coups and since the French withdrawal are only somewhat higher than what the continuation of pre-coup and pre-withdrawal trends would have meant. Additionally, juntas ignored peace-making opportunities that were present during critical windows after their takeovers, while enflaming insurgencies in some areas and allowing them to fester in others. This means that the rise in violence is not an inevitable consequence of a “security vacuum” but rather, in part, the result of policy choices the juntas made. Finally, if the region’s jihadists now operate in a more permissive environment, their prospects for overt state-building remain limited, as is the case globally in the wake of numerous failed “proto-states” (Lia, 2015<sup>[5]</sup>).

# ● PRE-COUP AND POST-COUP SECURITY TRENDS

## Expanding violence and its political fallout

The Sahel's post-coup insecurity partly carries over trends from the pre-coup period. A 2012 rebellion in northern Mali, followed by a jihadist takeover of the north, became the precipitating event for the current cycle of insecurity and instability. That rebellion and the intersecting jihadist state-building project drew on even earlier histories of cyclical rebellions, illicit economies, and jihadist mobilisation. In turn, the 2012 rebellion's aftermath reached into a widening circle of interconnected conflict zones: these include the Mopti and Ségou Regions of central Mali, the Ménaka Region of eastern Mali, the Tillabéri and Tahoua Regions of Niger, the Sahel and Est Regions of Burkina Faso, and others. Each of these areas had its own history of tensions between farmers and herders, between local powerbrokers and discontented populations, and between and within ethnic groups.

The spread of armed conflict transformed latent tensions into active violence while fostering new tensions in the process. Jihadists did not overtly rule territories as they had in 2012 but did expel and intimidate local officials. Security forces responded with intermittent patrols and operations that proved abusive and arbitrary (Human Rights Watch, 2017<sup>[6]</sup>), especially in areas with significant populations of ethnic Peul, who were stigmatised as jihadist sympathisers by security forces and by other communities (Cissé, 2020<sup>[7]</sup>). Security force responses further enflamed the conflicts while exposing soldiers to more jihadist attacks. There was no meaningful accountability for security force abuses during the pre-coup period, nor did states successfully restrain community self-defence groups. In some cases, states tolerated or even encouraged such groups. Mali's Dan Na Ambassagou militia, which has an ethnic Dogon base, is a case in point; authorities ordered the militia to disarm in 2019, but also welcomed the movement's representatives into the presidential majority after the legislative elections of 2020.

By 2018, substantial parts of Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger were zones of endemic violence. Violence was mostly trending upwards year on year across Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger. These trends set the stage for the coups, which were both a power grab by particular officers and a symptom of a situation that was physically unbearable for many people and politically intolerable for the masses in Sahelian capitals. To summarise the complex relationship between the insurgencies and the causes of the coups, the post-2012 insecurity advanced so dramatically and widely in part because of states' weak capacity and weak legitimacy. As insurgencies advanced, soldiers' attitudes hardened towards both civilians in the field and the civilian politicians overseeing them. Soldiers' anguish over their battlefield losses to jihadists were a key grievance against elected politicians; for example, in Burkina Faso, an attack against military police at Inata in November 2021 was one catalyst for the January 2022 coup.

At the same time, in the political arena, militaries as well as hereditary rulers and religious leaders retained broad-based legitimacy, in contrast to the growing popular rejection of the "political class." Such trends were visible in, for example, the results of the 2020 Afrobarometer survey in Mali (Afrobarometer/GREAT Mali, 2020<sup>[8]</sup>). Meanwhile, a version of "normal politics" continued, especially in the capitals, in the form of fairly ruthless and high-stakes intra-elite competitions for the presidency and for the spoils of power competitions in which electoral fraud, brazen political horse-trading, and the leveraging of courts against opponents all featured prominently. Wide citizen disgust with the "political class," and the pretext provided by insecurity, provided favourable environments for coups in all three countries .

## Pre-coup and post-coup fatalities: Trends and patterns

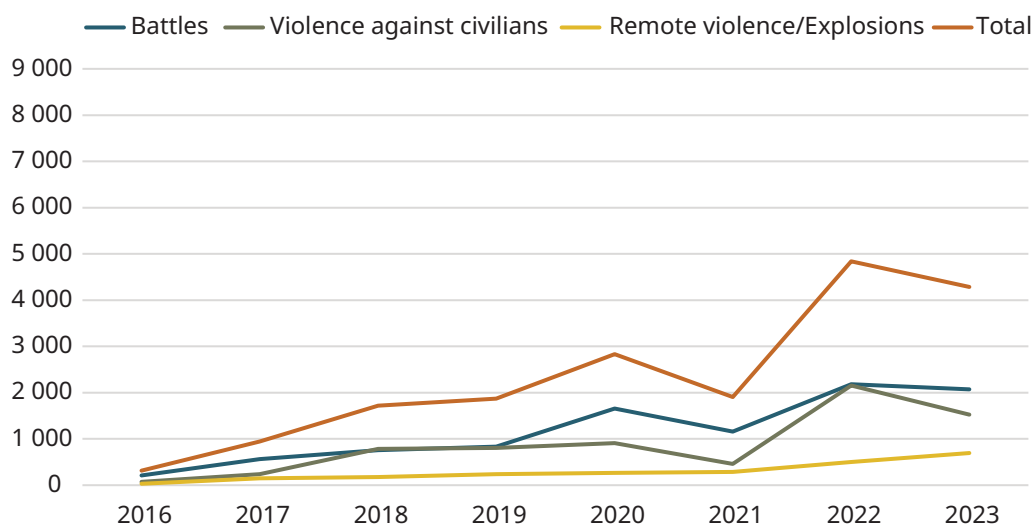
To understand the juntas' impact on security trends, it is vital to understand what trends preceded the coups. Using data from the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED) Project, which also conducts its own analysis of trends (e.g. Nsaibia, 2024<sup>[9]</sup>) this section contrasts the pre-coup and post-coup security trends in each of the three countries.

As measured by fatalities across three of ACLED's categories (battles, violence against civilians, and explosions/remote violence) from 2012 to 2023, Mali has had the most total fatalities (20 930), followed by Burkina Faso (20 088), with Niger a distant third (7 629). Most of those fatalities have occurred since 2019. During that period (2019-23), the most violent country has been Burkina Faso (19 552 fatalities) followed by Mali (15 726) and Niger (5 457).

Mali had an initial peak of violence during the 2012-13 conflict, with 518 fatalities in 2012 and 901 in 2013, in which the aftermath of the 2012 rebellion was bloodier than the rebellion itself. As [Figure 1](#) shows, death tolls then remained relatively low through the mid-2010s, perhaps reflecting short-term gains from French counterterrorism and reconstruction efforts (OECD/SWAC, 2020<sup>[2]</sup>), before jumping in 2017. The crisis in central Mali has been the main driver of the violence, and fatalities remained quite low in the far north even as killings exploded, especially in the eastern part of the Mopti Region, in the late 2010s. Expressed as percentage increases, the most dramatic jumps were from 2016 to 2017 (+201%) and 2017 to 2018 (+82%). The first full year that the military junta was in control saw a decrease in violence for the first time since 2016, with fatalities falling from 2 829 in 2020 to 1 903 in 2021 (-33%). Violence then leaped to unprecedented levels in 2022, with 4 848 fatalities (+155%). Yet violence fell somewhat in 2023, with 4 285 fatalities (-11%).

In Mali, given the erratic nature of the increases in violence, it is difficult to say what the trendline would have looked like had the junta not taken power. In absolute terms, 2022 was the bloodiest year of the conflict by far. At the same time, had certain pre-coup trends held, it is possible that levels of violence would have been approximately the same or greater by 2022. For example, if we conservatively say that the annual rate of fatalities increased by an average of 500 every year, fatalities might have neared 4 000 by 2022 even without a coup and even without France's withdrawal. Meanwhile, the junta's tenure has not coincided with an unremitting increase in violence, as shown by the slight drop from 2022 to 2023.

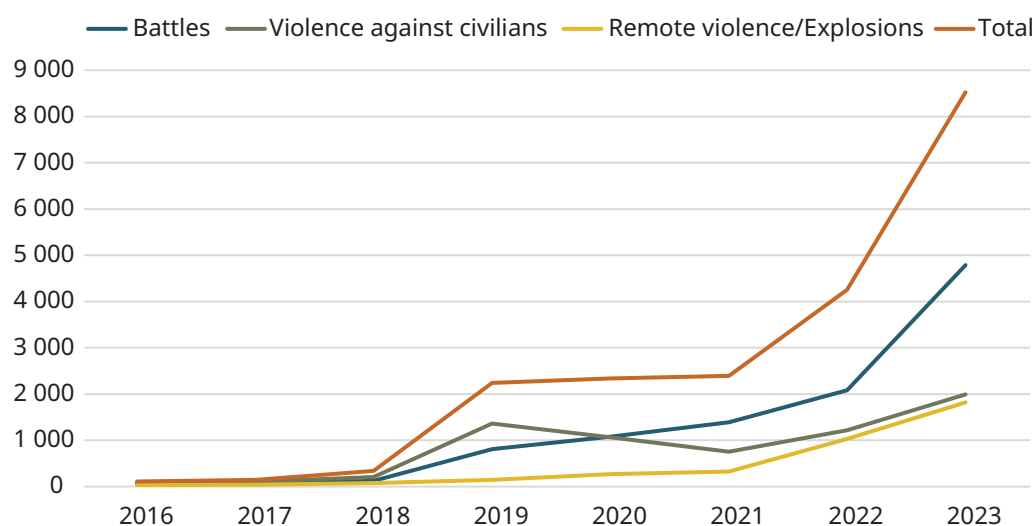
**Figure 1.**  
Armed conflict fatalities in Mali, 2016-23



Source: (ACLED, 2023<sup>[32]</sup>).

Comparing Mali and Burkina Faso sheds further light on how much of the uptick in violence is due to the coups and the French withdrawal, versus the simple continuation and exacerbation of pre-coup trends. In Burkina Faso, as [Figure 2](#) shows, fatalities from battles, remote violence, and violence against civilians were fewer than 100 per year until 2017. Percentage-wise, by far the biggest jump in the conflict came between 2018 and 2019, when fatalities went from 300 to 2 204 (+634%). Levels of fatalities effectively held steady in 2020 and 2021 before soaring in 2022 and 2023. Notably, the 2018-19 increase is substantially larger, percentage-wise, than either the 2021-22 increase (79%) or the 2022-23 increase (101%), although obviously in 2022 and 2023 the absolute numbers of fatalities dwarfed those of 2019. In Burkina Faso, where the French presence was less intensive than in Mali, the post-coup increases are more plausibly attributed to the exacerbation of pre-coup trends plus the juntas' impact, rather than to a security vacuum left by the French.

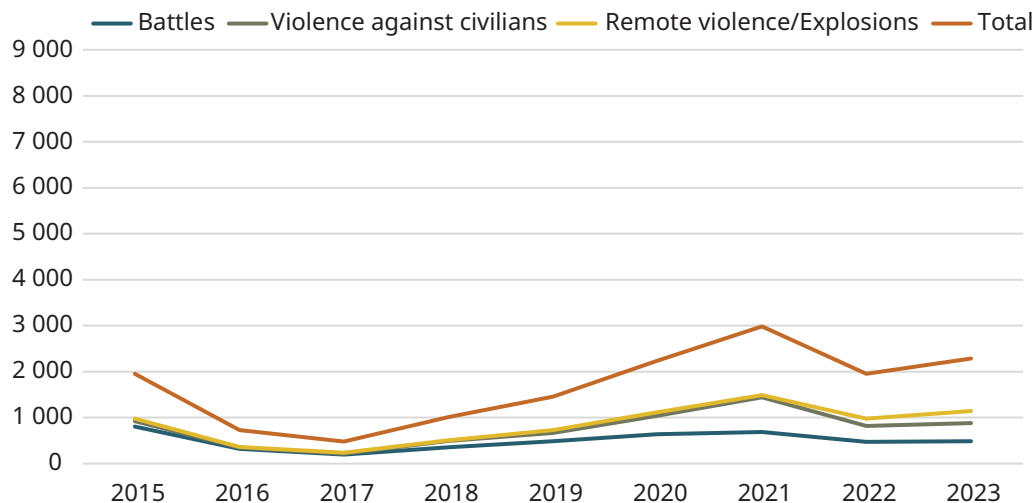
**Figure 2.**  
Armed conflict fatalities in Burkina Faso, 2016-23



Source: (ACLED, 2023<sup>[32]</sup>).

In Niger, tracking levels of violence is somewhat more complicated because Niger faced not one but two jihadist insurgencies during the period in question: one in the west that concerns this note, and one in the southeast as spillover from the Boko Haram and Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) insurgency in the Lake Chad Basin (Thurston, 2018<sup>[10]</sup>). The conflict in the southeast peaked in 2015, whereas the conflict in the west surged starting in 2018. Niger's fatality levels have remained well below those of Burkina Faso and Mali, but the major increases so far have occurred under civilian leadership ([Figure 3](#)).

**Figure 3.**  
**Armed Conflict Fatalities in Niger, 2015-23**



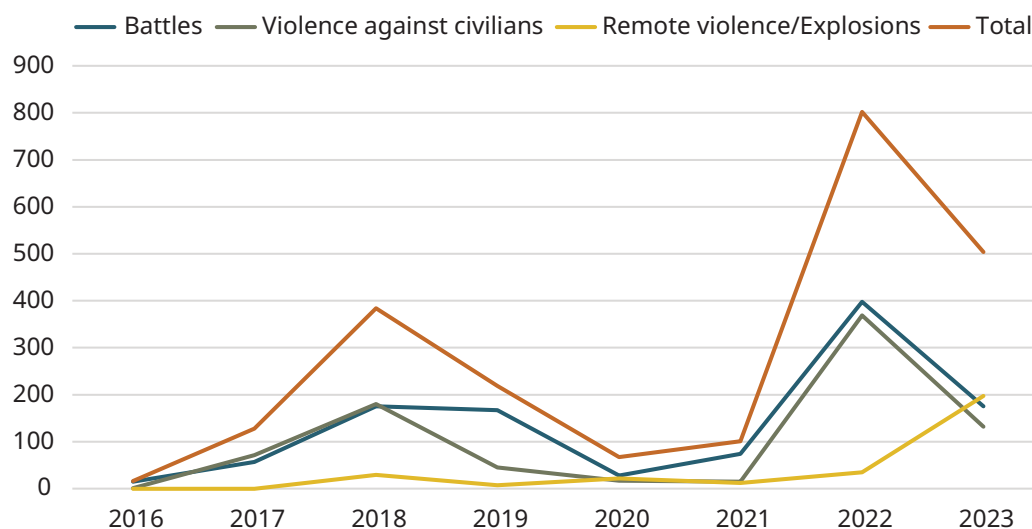
Source: (ACLED, 2023<sup>[32]</sup>).

Across all three countries, civilians paid a heavy price amid the uptick in violence. In Mali, ACLED data show that prior to 2020, the year of the coup, state forces had never killed more than 100 civilians in a year. In 2020, where the country was under civilian rule for nearly eight months and under military rule for slightly more than four months, state forces killed 269 civilians; in 2022, state forces killed 910 civilians, an all-time high, and in 2023, state forces killed 787 civilians. Rebels' violence against civilians, meanwhile, was under 500 every year except 2022, when it spiked to 1 031 before falling to 474 in 2023. In Burkina Faso, the most pronounced trend under military rule has been a sharp uptick in battle-related deaths. Meanwhile, the most severe year for state violence against civilians in Burkina Faso was 2019 (446 fatalities) followed by 2023 (443). Rebel forces' violence against civilians, meanwhile, has been mostly rising before and especially after the coups of 2022: rebels killed 529 civilians in 2019, 387 in 2020, 516 in 2021, 721 in 2022, and 1 332 in 2023.

Looking at the sub-national level, one key zone of conflict has been the Ménaka Region. [Figure 4](#) captures some of the trends in Ménaka through two spikes in violence, one pre-coup (2018-19) and one post-coup (2022-23). The 2018-19 spike was partly driven by Barkhane and its partnership with the Movement for the Salvation of Azawad (MSA) and the Imghad Tuareg Self-Defence Group and Allies (GATIA), while the 2022-2023 spike has been almost entirely driven by ISGS. The violence in Ménaka in 2022 would be the strongest indication that Barkhane's absence left a security vacuum although that argument could be nuanced in three ways. First, Barkhane contributed to the earlier spike in 2018-19, which while less severe, does undermine the claim that Barkhane inevitably brought peace. Second, fatalities fell by 37% in 2023, indicating that Barkhane's absence does not translate in a linear way into more violence. Third, Ménaka is only one of Mali's ten functional regions, and violence in this region only accounted for 17% fatalities even in 2022, the most violent year for both Mali generally and Ménaka specifically. It was Mopti where the most violence occurred that year, with 1 935 fatalities or approximately 40% of the total. Post-coup violence has thus been driven more by the escalating tempo of conflict in the centre of the country, where Barkhane's operations were limited, than in zones where Barkhane's assassinations may or may not have been suppressing jihadist activity.



**Figure 4.**  
Armed Conflict Fatalities in Mali's Ménaka Region, 2016-23



Source: (ACLED, 2023<sup>[32]</sup>).

In Burkina Faso, the subnational picture suggests that the surge in violence in 2022 and 2023 took place above all in three zones: Est, Centre-Nord, and Nord. The Sahel Region of Burkina Faso, the birthplace of the country's insurgency, remained violent, with 1 333 fatalities in 2021, 1 708 in 2022, and 1 834 in 2023. Yet other regions showed more dramatic explosions of violence during 2022 and 2023: the Centre-Nord Region went from 223 fatalities in 2021 to 1 448 in 2023. The Est Region went from 342 fatalities in 2021 to 1 474 in 2023, and the Nord Region went from 248 fatalities in 2021 to 1 124 in 2023. Of the 8 481 fatalities across Burkina Faso in 2023, nearly half came from the Centre-Nord, Est and Nord Regions, and approximately 70% came from those three regions plus the Sahel Region.

The escalation of violence in Burkina Faso thus reflects a continued high level of violence in the Sahel combined with the sharp escalation of deaths in regions that were already afflicted by the insurgency but had not yet become consistent killings fields until the military took power. It would be hard to attribute these complex trends simply to the absence of Barkhane or Operation Sabre (see below), especially given that Burkina Faso was a lower priority for Barkhane than was Mali and given that Sabre was a more limited force than Barkhane. Rather, the coup has brought about a situation wherein the Burkinabè security forces are fighting in the northern and eastern peripheries of the country while jihadists step up violence in several other regions, particularly in the northwest and the west.

### Analysis of fatality trends

Taken together, the data suggest that the coups have worsened and extended trends that were already mostly going in a bad direction before militaries took power in Mali and Burkina Faso. Fatalities would likely have continued to rise even without the coups, but the sharp uptick in fatalities following the coups suggests that they had some additional — albeit uneven — impact. The key post-coup trends are the dramatic rise in fatalities in both Mali and Burkina Faso, the surge in jihadist killings in Ménaka in 2022 and then the drop in fatalities there as jihadists moved to consolidate power, and the continued high levels of violence in longstanding conflict zones such as Mali's Mopti Region and Burkina Faso's Sahel Region. The clearest indication that Barkhane's withdrawal mattered is in Ménaka; elsewhere, it appears to be less a security vacuum and more the juntas' own will to power that is driving escalation. In Mali as in Burkina Faso, juntas inherited a worsening situation that had already transformed from sporadic attacks into a full-fledged insurgency under civilian leadership. In Mali, political violence increased each year between 2016 and 2020; roughly six times as many people were killed in 2019 as in 2016. In Burkina Faso, fatalities shot up from 2018 to 2019 and then remained at crisis levels.

Juntas enflamed these situations. The clearest effects of juntas taking power are (i) violence involving State forces spiked in Mali and Burkina Faso, (ii) battlefield deaths surged in Burkina Faso, (iii) endemic conflict continued in major combat zones such as Mali's Mopti and Burkina Faso's Sahel Region, and (iiii) some zones saw major increases in jihadist violence, particularly Ménaka in Mali and to a lesser extent the Est, Centre-Nord, and Nord Regions of Burkina Faso. Moreover, not all escalation is the same: arguably, the junta in Mali has escalated the violence through its own aggression while the junta in Burkina Faso has escalated the violence out of its own desperation. In Niger, not enough time has yet elapsed since the July 2023 coup to assess its impact on security. Some analysts and journalists have argued that tenuous progress towards peace occurred under civilian President Mohamed Bazoum, who was in office from 2021-23 (Armstrong, 2023<sup>[11]</sup>). Bazoum indeed pursued some of the alternative measures that some civil society groups and analysts had recommended across the Sahel, notably in terms of seeking dialogue with jihadists. Yet levels of violence fluctuated during Bazoum's brief presidency, suggesting either that his approach did not have enough time to unambiguously succeed, or that its success has been overstated.

In sum, the coups of 2020-23 have had a negative additional effect on Sahelian security. At a minimum, the juntas failed to reverse mounting insecurity, and in Mali and Burkina Faso the data strongly suggest that coups accelerated the rise of insecurity over what the baseline increase might otherwise have been. However, the coups' effects have been complex and uneven, especially when assessed at the subnational level.

## ● ESCALATORY YET INCONSISTENT COUNTERINSURGENCY POLICIES

Insecurity as well as corruption and economic stagnation provided pretexts for taking power (Studio Kalangou, 2023<sup>[12]</sup>). That does not mean that the new Sahelian juntas have made addressing insecurity their top policy priority. Indeed, the juntas, especially in Mali and Niger, have focused on managing domestic politics and economic catastrophes while wrangling with the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and France over issues related to transition timetables and sovereignty. Juntas have also channelled grievances within the militaries and within some elements of the public and the political class regarding past conflicts and unresolved tensions with certain conventional rebels. Such tensions are especially visible in Mali, where the junta and the northern armed bloc called the Coordination of Movements of Azawad (CMA, itself the main faction within a larger coalition created in 2021 and known as the *Cadre Stratégique Permanent* or CSP) had increasing tensions during the 2020-23 period, culminating in a return to direct armed conflict in August 2023 amid the handover of MINUSMA bases in the north. In Niger, to a lesser extent, there have been tensions between the new junta and certain past leaders of rebellions in Tuareg zones, although the junta's abrogation of a 2015 law restricting migration through northern Niger could be seen as an effort to pacify stakeholders in the Agadez Region, a former bastion of rebellion between the 1980s and the 2000s.

Amid these competing crises, juntas have followed an improvisatory approach to dealing with jihadist insurgencies. At least five approaches have been pursued: negotiating, cracking down, outsourcing/partnering, using air power, and ignoring the problem. In Mali, for example, one of the junta's first moves upon taking power was to conclude a mass prisoner exchange with JNIM in October 2020, finalising negotiations that had begun under Keïta. The same month, however, the military made a highly mediatised deployment to Farabougou, a central Malian town that had been blockaded by JNIM, before then quietly scaling back its presence there. Both the Malian and Burkinabè juntas have also turned to paramilitary forces to help manage the jihadist insurgencies. Mali partnered with the Kremlin-linked Wagner Group starting in late 2021, while the Burkinabè junta expanded the size and mandate of the Volunteers for the Defence of the Homeland (VDP). As both perpetrators and as a target for jihadists, the expansion of the VDP has further exacerbated the crisis in Burkina Faso (Agence France-Presse, 2023<sup>[13]</sup>).

The combination of partnering/outourcing and cracking down have produced some of the worst violence of the entire Sahelian conflict, including the massacre perpetrated by FAMA and Wagner in the central Malian town of Moura in March 2022. Burkinabè forces also authored an egregious massacre at Karma in April 2023 as revenge for jihadist attacks on army and VDP positions nearby (Amnesty International, 2023<sup>[14]</sup>). Such massacres reflect substantial continuity with pre-coup trends. Massacres at the hands of various perpetrators have been a consistent feature of the Sahel conflict from 2019 on, for example at Yirgou, Burkina Faso in January 2019 by the Koglweogo; at Ogossagou and Welingara in March 2019 in Mali by the ethnic militia Dan Na Ambassagou; around Inates in Niger in March/April 2020 by Nigerien soldiers; at Solhan, Burkina Faso in June 2021 by JNIM elements.

Indeed, a striking feature of the Sahel conflict overall is that despite their differences in worldview, the security forces, the ethnic militias, and the jihadist forces all share a willingness to kill civilians en masse as punishment for resisting their respective rule, and as part of cycles of violence where massacres against one community generate massacres against the perceived perpetrators (OECD/SWAC, 2021<sup>[15]</sup>). Both the Burkinabè and Nigerien militaries, for example, have been both victims and perpetrators of massacres. The coups have to some extent removed restraints on how far militaries are willing to go in killing civilians, but such restraints were already quite weak under Presidents Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta (Mali), Roch Marc Kaboré (Burkina Faso), and Mahamadou Issoufou (Niger), and the lack of accountability from the late 2010s fed directly into the abusive climate under the juntas.

In terms of air power, Malian forces have conducted periodic airstrikes in zones of jihadist dominance, notably central Mali and the Ménaka Region. The Malian forces also extensively used air power in their push to capture the northern city of Kidal from the CMA in October/November 2023. The use of air strikes is closely related to yet another strategy deployed by the Malian junta, namely ignoring the jihadist insurgency in some zones. In the Ménaka Region, both civilians and non-state armed groups have accused the junta and FAMA of effectively ceding all but the city of Ménaka itself to ISGS. From the point of view of effective counterinsurgency, the hands-off approach to Ménaka combined with egregiously abusive episodic violence against civilians in central Mopti is the worst possible approach, enflaming the conflict while resulting in no net gains of territory. The spike in violence under these juntas is thus not an inevitable consequence of the coups or the French withdrawal, but is the result of specific policy choices, particularly the empowerment of Wagner and the inconsistent swings between crackdowns and neglect.

In contrast to how juntas have approached jihadism in Mali and Burkina Faso, two other paths might have been possible. One would have been to negotiate with jihadists, particularly JNIM. In early 2020, before the Malian junta took power, both Keita and JNIM had expressed at least theoretical willingness to conduct dialogue, and Keita acknowledged that he had been in contact with senior jihadists (France24, 2020<sup>[16]</sup>). Even before that, elements of Malian civil society had been calling for dialogue since 2017. The prisoner exchange in October 2020, concluded under the auspices of the junta, could have created an opening for the new Malian junta to pursue wider-ranging talks and even a ceasefire. This period also created a political opening that France could have taken advantage of to allow for a dignified withdrawal (Nars and Parens, 2023<sup>[17]</sup>). In Burkina Faso, meanwhile, it has been widely reported that limited negotiations unfolded between the government of Kaboré and jihadists in 2020 to facilitate the conduct of presidential elections, which saw Kaboré re-elected (Mednick, 2021<sup>[18]</sup>). Alongside these limited national-level negotiations with JNIM in Mali and Burkina Faso, there were numerous community-level pacts involving JNIM in both countries.

The second path available to juntas would have been focused and disciplined anti-jihadist military campaigns. The Malian military's deployment to Farabougou soon after the junta took power, and the FAMA's 2023 reconquest of Kidal, both indicate that the Malian Armed Forces have the capacity to win certain battlefield victories, especially the retaking of discrete territories. It is conceivable that the junta could have focused on strategically retaking key towns from and slowly expanding government control into surrounding rural areas. Instead, the junta opted for an approach that was both erratic and highly punitive, thereby alienating civilians, squandering military resources, and failing to achieve any durable gains against jihadists. The junta in Mali also simply created too many political enemies, at home and abroad, to allow for a focused campaign against jihadists—although, as noted above, the junta's political survival does not depend on demonstrating battlefield gains against JNIM or ISGS.

Neither the peace-making approach nor the focused military campaign would have guaranteed success. Yet either approach would have been more viable than the path the junta followed. It is not the mere fact of juntas taking power that has further enflamed the Sahel, then, but rather the concrete choices the juntas have made. The next section applies a similar logic to examining the dynamic of the French withdrawal, arguing that France's eventual withdrawal was inevitable but that a "security vacuum" is not the best way to understand what followed.

## ● CAUSES AND IMPACT OF FRANCE'S WITHDRAWAL POLICIES

France led a military intervention into Mali in January 2013 out of concerns that a push by jihadists into central Mali represented a major step towards a jihadist assault on Bamako. That operation, called Serval, broke jihadist control over Gao, Timbuktu, Kidal, and other northern towns in January (Thurston, 2020<sup>[19]</sup>). A search for jihadist leaders lasted into February. Operation Serval continued through July 2014, after which it was replaced by Operation Barkhane. This latter mission was a region-wide counterterrorism effort covering Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Chad, and headquartered in Chad's capital N'Djamena. Barkhane was paralleled and supported by a shifting set of initiatives, including security-focused institutions such as the G5 Sahel Joint Force (created in 2017) and political frameworks, such as the Alliance for the Sahel (created in 2017, and not to be confused with the later Alliance of Sahel States created by the Malian, Burkinabè, and Nigerien juntas in 2023). Alongside Barkhane were two other French-led missions, a Europe-wide special forces group called Takuba Task Force (2020-22) and a Burkina Faso-based mission called Operation Sabre, which was formalised in 2018 and was later ended by the Burkinabè junta in 2023.

### **Barkhane's strategic failures**

In practice, Barkhane and associated forces functioned as an assassination campaign and rapid response force targeting jihadist leaders in Mali and to a lesser extent Burkina Faso. Barkhane and the associated French-led missions operated a network of bases across northern Mali, with the largest at Gao and others in Tessalit, Timbuktu, Gossi, and Ménaka. Barkhane's troop strength exceeded 5 000 by 2020, and together with Takuba (roughly 600 troops) and Sabre (roughly 400) there were over 6 000 European soldiers in the anti-jihadist campaign at its peak.

Mali's August 2020 coup did not halt Barkhane, and French policy makers did not appear unnerved by the military's takeover. They did not, for example, call for the return of ousted President Keïta, in contrast to later French policy regarding the July 2023 coup in Niger. Rather, it was the May 2021 "coup within a coup," wherein the coup-makers of August 2020 asserted their power over the "transition" even more blatantly, that prompted French President Emmanuel Macron to suspend joint French-Malian operations and announce a transformation in the mission. Barkhane operations continued into 2022, for example in a March 2022 strike against ISGS (Agence France-Presse, 2022<sup>[20]</sup>). The formal end of Barkhane came in November 2022.

Regarding the impact of Barkhane's withdrawal, it is impossible to either prove or falsify the argument that Barkhane and the associated Western-backed security infrastructure held fatalities to a level lower than they would have been otherwise. At the national level, as noted above, violence rose significantly in Mali and Burkina Faso in the second half of the 2010s, prior to either the coups or the French withdrawal. In Mali, it took less than five years from the French-led intervention of January 2013 to reach a point at which levels of violence were higher than they had been during the jihadist mobilisation that had precipitated the intervention in the first place. Nor did French, European, American or other forms of military assistance and training appear to meaningfully restrain the human rights abuses conducted by the Malian, Burkinabè and Nigerien militaries (Wilén, 2022<sup>[21]</sup>).

Barkhane had limitations that contributed to its failure to prevent the increase in violence. When it came to JNIM, Barkhane appeared, based on French officials' rhetoric and press reporting about Barkhane's operations, to focus on assassinating top jihadist leaders in northern Mali, including non-Malians on Malian soil. Barkhane had a high success rate in terms of assassinations, killing senior AQIM and JNIM leaders such as Abu al-Hasan al-Ansari and Malick ag Wanasnat (February 2018), Yahya Abu al-Hammam (February 2019), Abdelmalek Droukdel (June 2020), Ba ag Moussa (November 2020), and Adnan Abu Walid al-Sahrawi (August 2021). Barkhane also killed numerous mid-level commanders, logisticians and operatives.

The assassination campaign appeared premised on a theory that removing top leaders would disorient and ultimately shatter AQIM, JNIM and ISGS. This top-down approach, however, was fundamentally at odds with what journalists and analysts repeatedly identified as the powerful bottom-up drivers of the conflict: land use conflicts, tensions over social hierarchies, the ‘ethnicisation’ of violence, the boomerang effects of state security force abuses, and more (Raleigh, Nsaibia and Dowd, 2021<sup>[22]</sup>). Within Mali, moreover, Barkhane focused on northern Mali, and most of its top targets were the Tuareg and Arab operatives who made up the upper echelons of AQIM and JNIM, all while violence worsened in central Mali.

Another problem was that Barkhane appears to have had greater latitude, under its relationship with Keita, to operate in northern Mali than in central Mali. In theory, disrupting JNIM’s command pyramid in northern Mali could have produced repercussions that would filter down to the level of rank-and-file fighters in central Mali, but in practice, such results failed to manifest. Barkhane’s most prominent strikes in central Mali, meanwhile, represented some of the greatest blunders of the entire mission, especially in terms of public relations and local perceptions. One such blunder was the November 2018 clash with Katibat Macina in the Youwarou Circle of Mopti, after which the French government erroneously claimed that it had killed Amadou Kouffa. Another significant blunder was the January 2021 airstrike on a wedding party at Bounti (Freudenthal et al., 2021<sup>[22]</sup>), which became a major public relations fiasco for France.

In terms of Barkhane’s approach to ISGS, meanwhile, there seems to have been three core problems. First, Barkhane’s 2018 campaign against ISGS involved a partnership with GATIA and MSA that inadvertently facilitated the escalation of intercommunal tensions in the Mali-Niger borderlands (Nsaibia, 2018<sup>[23]</sup>), in ways that continue to reverberate through the time of writing in terms of continued targeted killings on an ethnic basis. Second, as with JNIM, the top-down assassination campaign against ISGS could at best sometimes put the organisation temporarily off-balance but could not defeat it. Third, pressure on ISGS in one geographical area sometimes resulted in squeezing the group into an adjacent geographical area, displacing but again not solving the problem (OECD/SWAC, 2020<sup>[21]</sup>).

Meanwhile, Barkhane and France faced an increasing lack of political acceptance in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger. There are five structural reasons for this rejection, and all those reasons predate the coups and the current wave of Russian influence and propaganda in the Sahel. First, memories of colonial control and violence remain. Second, some Sahelian thinkers and citizens see France as a neocolonial power, particularly in terms of the French military presence and the French state influence over the CFA Franc currency. Third, some Sahelian citizens see the ‘political class’ (meaning both the typical winners of elections and the main opposition faces) as self-interested, corrupt, Francophile, and subservient to France. Fourth, France and Barkhane did not convince many ordinary people that their counterterrorism operations were producing meaningful gains in terms of quotidian security. Fifth, the protracted character and escalation of insecurity amid the French deployment fostered and encouraged the circulation of conspiracy theories that portrayed France and Barkhane as agents of instability and resource extraction rather than as benevolent partners.

One particular problem for France was the seeming invincibility of JNIM’s leader, the chameleon-like northern Malian politician Iyad ag Ghali, whose survival amid the deaths of so many other JNIM and AQIM leaders fuelled conspiracy theories about possible pacts between ag Ghali and Algeria or between ag Ghali and France. Even before the entrance of Russian propaganda against France, the terrain was prepared for large numbers of Sahelian citizens to accuse France of neocolonial designs and other nefarious intentions.

The political model underpinning Barkhane was thin and brittle. This model rested on the vague idea that Sahelian countries could make political progress amid the counterinsurgency campaign, even as that campaign depended on the goodwill of civilian leaders with weak legitimacy. How could France reform the very states whose leaders it relied upon for political support? Mali’s Keita was a case in point. A fixture of the political class since the 1990s, Keita had a crisis-ridden seven-year tenure (2013-20), marked not only by growing insecurity but also by several major corruption scandals and by rapid turnover in terms of prime ministers and governments. Military setbacks intersected with Keita’s growing unpopularity, particularly within Bamako, and became linked to the growing unpopularity of France, Barkhane and French-backed initiatives such as the G5 Sahel Joint Force. These interactions were on display in June



2019 with protests in Bamako against the installation of the G5 Sahel Joint Force's headquarters in the capital city's Badalabougou neighbourhood, after the G5 was forced out of central Mali by a JNIM attack on the G5 base at Sévaré in 2018. In additional signs of Mali's troubled politics, Keïta's re-election in 2018 evoked substantial allegations of fraud, while the 2020 legislative elections saw the Constitutional Court overturn the results of ten races to the benefit of Keïta's political party.

For France, reliant upon Keïta, there was little choice but to overlook signs of electoral irregularities and post-electoral interference. Even as France turned a blind eye to Keïta's overreach, however, backlash against the Constitutional Court's 2020 manoeuvre set in motion protest waves against Keïta, directly creating the conditions that led to the August 2020 coup. For the new junta, seeking popular legitimacy, it was an obvious step to latch onto anti-French sentiment. It is also possible that officers within the junta, like officers in Sahelian forces more broadly, resented the long years of paternalistic training programmes and selective operational exclusion perpetuated by France and other European countries. In other words, the political relationships underpinning Barkhane made it likely that France's civilian partners would be overthrown by military officers who would be sceptical of France. Meanwhile, although the coups in Burkina Faso and Niger had their own domestic roots, the Malian junta's ruling style provided a template that was easily imitated, in terms of a populist, anti-France, anti-ECOWAS posture.

### **The unfulfilled return of the state**

Beyond the level of specific politicians, there was also a structural problem with France's theory that counterterrorism operations could facilitate the 'return of the state' to conflict zones. That theory was shaky on at least three grounds. First, Sahelian states had been skeletal in some areas and had been widely perceived as corrupt and predatory in other areas, meaning that the question was not so much one of restoring the state as reimagining the state. Second, the combination of France's assassination campaigns plus the ground-level, intermittent, and highly abuse-prone patrols by Sahelian militaries did little, in and of themselves, to prepare the terrain for a 'return of the state.' There were no gains in quotidian security that would have permitted the return of administrators, especially to rural areas, and security force abuses set back the prospects for an effective 'return of the state.' Third, the escalating conflict and its ethnicisation contributed to a process wherein de facto territorial control involved a patchwork of competing authority systems predicated on various forms of rebel governance and militia governance, all of which further undermined the prospects for a 'return of the state.'

Given that the 'return of the state' was effectively impossible amid Barkhane, the mission was for all intents and purposes open-ended. And without realistic prospects for the type of political success that would allow French authorities to wrap up Barkhane on their own terms, it was inevitable that Barkhane would instead end either with French fatigue or with a political rupture in the Sahel. Such a rupture did not necessarily have to take the form of a coup (it could have taken the form of a populist civilian leader expelling the French forces, for example). However, given the Sahel's long history of coups, it is unsurprising, in retrospect, that things played out the way they did. Given that the same outcome was repeated across the three countries, moreover, the problem is clearly structural and not specifically related to the venality of any individual military leader or clique. It is also worth noting that a high degree of political fatigue had arisen within France even by 2017, when France turned to the G5 Sahel Joint Force as the possible nucleus of an exit strategy. The difficulty France experienced in crafting that strategy, and the continued imperiousness France displayed towards Sahelian leaders (for instance, by summoning all of them to Pau for a summit in January 2020), both point to the ways in which Barkhane became open-ended and thereby sealed its own failure.

Turning to the post-coup trends in Mali, the clearest indication that Barkhane's withdrawal worsened the situation would be the spike in violence from 2021 to 2022 at the national level in Mali, and the dramatic change in fortunes for ISGS in the Ménaka Region. In March 2022, ISGS began an offensive in Ménaka that resulted in them controlling most of the Region (except the city of Ménaka itself) by May 2023. During this campaign, ISGS clashed with the MSA, GATIA and JNIM, while the FAMA periodically struck at ISGS, mostly from

the air. One problem with a linear narrative about Barkhane's impact on security trends is that 2022 was a deadlier year than 2023 in Mali, especially in Ménaka, where violence dropped starkly in 2023, in part because ISGS was consolidating control. It is possible that with more data, it will emerge that the year of Barkhane's withdrawal (2021-22) was more violent than the period of Barkhane's absence (late 2022 onwards). In Burkina Faso, meanwhile, violence has soared under the junta, but that increase was already well underway by the time Operation Sabre wrapped up in February 2023.

## ● JIHADIST STRATEGIES

In a December 2023 statement, JNIM leader Iyad ag Ghali said that the jihad had entered a “new stage of confrontation” under the military regimes in the Sahel since approximately 2021. He took note of Malian military's conquest of Kidal, as well the widespread escalation in violence in Mali and Burkina Faso. He presented JNIM as the defender of innocent Muslims who were, in his words, “being crushed between the anvil of the extremists (ghulat) and the hammer of the apostate army and the Wagner mercenaries” (Ag Ghali, 2023<sup>[24]</sup>). In practice, however, in the post-coup era, JNIM has largely continued three of its pre-existing campaigns: (1) attempting to continue expanding southwards, (2) intermittent spectacular attacks, and (3) fighting ISGS and participating in loose coalitions against ISGS with other armed groups. In terms of what is new or different, the presence of Wagner has provided JNIM with a new enemy, as have the juntas themselves, although JNIM's rhetoric has to some extent just replaced France with Wagner.

Regarding JNIM's geographical expansion, the coups may be an enabling factor but were not the primary cause, as JNIM was already probing southern Mali, as well as the northern regions of West African coastal countries, before the coups. For example, a major JNIM attack on Kafolo, northern Côte d'Ivoire, occurred in June 2020, prior to Mali's coup. Moreover, the jihadist encroachment on West African coastal countries — often portrayed in the media as an inexorable trend — has in fact been very uneven temporally and geographically. Côte d'Ivoire has even been credited with some tentative success in avoiding, so far at least, turning a handful of jihadist attacks into a wider insurgency (International Crisis Group, 2023<sup>[25]</sup>).

In terms of spectacular attacks, JNIM's antecedents in the Saharan-Sahelian orbit of AQIM conducted numerous major, albeit sporadic, terrorist attacks in the period from 2005 through JNIM's founding in 2017 and just after. These included substantial incidents of urban terrorism in Sahelian capitals, such as the November 2015 attack on the Radisson Blu hotel in Bamako, the January 2016 assault on a hotel and restaurant in Ouagadougou, and the March 2018 targeting of the French embassy and military headquarters in Ouagadougou. Overall, however, this wave of targeting capitals, and especially targeting civilians in capitals, trailed off after the 2018 attack. Since then, some of JNIM's most dramatic assaults have targeted military bases, for example in the June 2018 car bombing at the G5 Sahel Joint Force base in Sévaré, the July 2022 car bombing of the Malian military's main base at Kati, and the April 2023 complex attack near a Malian military base in Sévaré. JNIM can maintain a tempo of near-daily minor attacks, especially in rural areas, but appears to lack the capacity to engage in a sustained campaign of urban terrorism or in more than sporadic mass assaults on military bases.

Regarding JNIM's fighting with ISGS, this trend too predates the coup wave. JNIM-ISGS relations deteriorated from a period of truce and even co-operation between 2015-19 into warfare and tension starting in mid-2019 (Nsaibia and Weiss, 2020<sup>[26]</sup>). ISGS' expansion in Ménaka in 2022-23 has been a challenge to JNIM, revealing some of the limits of JNIM's military capabilities there. In January 2023, ag Ghali reportedly met with representatives of other northern Malian armed groups to discuss co-ordination against ISGS (RFI, 2023<sup>[27]</sup>), but these efforts have not yet disrupted the Islamic State's sway in Ménaka.



In terms of new elements in JNIM's strategy, one of JNIM's largest rhetorical and operational shifts has been to focus on Wagner. Indeed, Wagner's arrival enabled JNIM to maintain almost seamless continuity in promoting the narrative that JNIM is protecting Mali against foreign occupiers—first France, and now Wagner. The FAMA/Wagner massacre in Moura in March 2022 was an early marker of how violent and brutal Wagner's presence would be, and JNIM took full rhetorical advantage of that event and of Wagner's overall campaign. In an April 2022 statement, for example, JNIM celebrated its seizure of a Wagner fighter in Ségou and condemned “these criminal forces” for their behaviour in Moura and their killing of “hundreds of defenceless innocents” (JNIM, 2022<sup>[28]</sup>). Wagner's overt participation in the FAMA's reconquest of Kidal in November 2023 could further boost JNIM's claims to be defending the north against foreign incursions and abuses.

Neither JNIM nor even ISGS, meanwhile, has been bold enough to capture and hold a major city. Even in endemic conflict zones such as Mopti and Ménaka in Mali, or Soum Province in Burkina Faso, administrative centres have remained islands of nominal government control (OECD/SWAC, 2023<sup>[29]</sup>). JNIM and to a lesser extent have used economic warfare against such towns, periodically imposing blockades, for example against Djibo in Burkina Faso. In November 2023, JNIM attacked a military base, a VDP station, and camps for the displaced around Djibo, in what JNIM called a “raid” and what Burkinabè authorities labelled a failed JNIM attempt to take the town (Le Cam, 2023<sup>[30]</sup>). JNIM succeeded in destroying part of the military base but was pushed back in part through drone strikes (Roger, 2023<sup>[31]</sup>). While it appears JNIM may not have been attempting to outright conquer the town, the attack shows the difficulties JNIM would face if it attempted to hold Djibo or any other major town in the Sahel.

The hesitation both JNIM and ISGS show about bidding for control over major towns reflects a global dilemma for jihadists. The aftermath of proto-states' collapse in Mali, Nigeria, Syria, Iraq and elsewhere suggests that state-building projects elicit major military responses, whereas protracted rural shadow governance allows jihadists to conduct taxation, recruitment, and forms of administration without causing panic in national capitals. The Sahelian jihadist scene at the end of 2023 is thus one of escalating violence in a permissive environment, but not full-blown state-building.

## ● PERSPECTIVES

The Sahel's coup wave in 2020-23 has brought a substantial increase in political repression while allowing jihadist violence (and other forms of violence) to expand and worsen. Yet the post-coup trends have, in many ways, been a continuation and amplification of pre-coup trends. Violence was growing before 2020 and has continued growing after; political repression and executive overreach were features of pre-2020 politics as well; and Western-led and Western-backed security initiatives were already faltering before the coups. Moreover, the coups were a consequence — not inevitable but, in retrospect, highly likely — of the pre-coup situation and the interlinked failures of Sahelian civilian elites and French security policy. That coups have compounded and exacerbated those failures, leading the Sahel into an even grimmer place.

The current status and likely medium-term future of Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger is one wherein military juntas preside over skeletal states in an atmosphere of endemic and escalating violence. These states are skeletal not just in the sense of limited resources, but also in terms of the actual physical map of state control, where these rule major towns and some rural areas while ceding control over conflict zones to an array of armed actors, including jihadists. Here, too, the post-coup situation differs from what preceded it more in degree than in kind, given that under figures such as Keita and Kaboré, state control was already seriously limited. The Malian junta's capture of Kidal in November 2023 suggests that states still have the power to alter the political map by force, but within severe constraints — the kind of power projected against the CMA in Kidal may not even be sustainable, let alone scalable against jihadists.

The next few years are likely to bring continued efforts by the juntas to extend their time in power, whether through further unilateral adjustments to timetables or through manoeuvres to run their own members or their proxies in elections. The main threat to juntas' power would appear to be further coups, meaning that even in some of the most turbulent scenarios, military rule itself would continue, just under different leadership. Juntas need only control capitals, meanwhile, to guarantee their physical and political survival. Continued military dominance at the political centre is thus likely to be paralleled by continued and escalating jihadist violence. The key questions are whether jihadists will eventually attempt more systematic state-building, whether anti-junta politics will trigger major political realignments between jihadists and other armed groups, and whether Sahelian violence will be fundamentally contained or will continue to spill over into West African coastal countries, perhaps even at a level not yet seen in the 2020-23 period; such an escalation would demand new thinking at the national and especially the regional level among the coastal countries, which risk both underappreciating the challenge and overreacting to it.

## ● REFERENCES

- ACLED (2024), *Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project*, <https://acleddata.com/>. [32]
- Africa Center for Strategic Studies (2023), "Mali Catastrophe Accelerating under Junta Rule", 10 July, Washington DC, <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/mali-catastrophe-accelerating-under-junta-rule/>. [3]
- Afrobarometer/GREAT Mali (2020), "Résumé des résultats. Enquête Afrobarometer Round 8 au Mali, 2020", [https://www.afrobarometer.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/afrobarometer\\_sor\\_mli\\_r8\\_fr\\_2020-10-21.pdf](https://www.afrobarometer.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/afrobarometer_sor_mli_r8_fr_2020-10-21.pdf). [8]
- Ag Ghali, I. (2023), "Wa-la-yansurann Allah man yansuruh", Al-Zallaqa Media, <https://jihadology.net/2023/12/12/new-video-message-from-jamaat-nu%e1%b9%a3rat-al-islam-wa-l-muslimins-iyad-agh-ghali-and-god-will-surely-support-those-who-support-him/>. [24]
- Agence France-Presse (2023), "Rights Group Blames Volunteer Militia in New Burkina Bloodshed", 3 January. [13]
- Agence France-Presse (2022), "La force française Barkhane 'neutralise' 15 membres du groupe Etat islamique au Mali", 25 March. [20]
- Amnesty International (2023), "Burkina Faso: Responsibility of the army indicated in Karma massacre", 3 May <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/05/burkina-faso-la-responsabilite-des-forces-speciales-de-larmee-pointee-dans-le-massacre-de-karma/>. [14]
- Armstrong, H. (2023), "Comprehending the Lull: Recovering Niger's North Tillabery", Konrad Adenauer Stiftung Sahel Programme, April, <https://www.kas.de/documents/265798/23405107/Tillabery+accalmie+3iv23.pdf/f41a9e25-9355-7b14-783f-434ed19fd7cf?version=1.0&t=1681727019588>. [11]
- Cissé, M. (2020), "Understanding Fulani Perspectives on the Sahel Crisis", Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 22 April, Washington DC, <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/understanding-fulani-perspectives-sahel-crisis/>. [7]
- Elischer, S (2021), "Militaries in Sahelian Politics", *The Oxford Handbook of the African Sahel*, Oxford University Press, Oxford. [1]
- France24 (2020), "Mali's President Admits to Holding Talks with Senior Jihadist Leaders", 10 February. [16]
- Freudenthal, E. et al (2021), "Uncovering the Civilian Toll of France's Anti-Jihadist War in Mali", *The New Humanitarian*, 16 June. [22]
- Human Rights Watch (2017), "Mali: Unchecked Abuses in Military Operations", 8 September, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/09/08/mali-unchecked-abuses-military-operations>. [6]
- International Crisis Group (2023), "Keeping Jihadists Out of Northern Côte d'Ivoire", 11 August, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/cote-divoire/b192-keeping-jihadists-out-northern-cote-divoire>. [25]
- JNIM (2022), "Jihaduna Qa'im wa-'Amaliyyatuna Mustamirra", al-Zallaqa, 24 April, [https://jihadology.net/wp-content/uploads/\\_pda/2022/04/Jama%CC%84at-Nus%CC%A3rat-al-Isla%CC%84m-Wa-l-Muslimi%CC%84n-22Our-Jiha%CC%84d-Is-Ongoing-And-Our-Operations-Continue22.pdf](https://jihadology.net/wp-content/uploads/_pda/2022/04/Jama%CC%84at-Nus%CC%A3rat-al-Isla%CC%84m-Wa-l-Muslimi%CC%84n-22Our-Jiha%CC%84d-Is-Ongoing-And-Our-Operations-Continue22.pdf). [28]

- Le Cam, M. (2023), "Au Burkina Faso, la guerre de propagande fait rage après l'attaque djihadiste sur Djibo", *Le Monde*, 1 December. [30]
- Lia, B (2015), "Understanding Jihadi Proto-States", *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Vol. 9, No. 4, pp. 31-41. [5]
- Mednick, S. (2021), EXCLUSIVE: Burkina Faso's Secret Peace Talks and Fragile Jihadist Ceasefire, *The New Humanitarian*, 11 March. [18]
- Nars, W. and R. Parens (2023), "France's Missed Moments in Mali", The Soufan Center, July, New York, <https://thesoufancenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/TSC-Insights-Frances-Missed-Moments-In-Mali.pdf>. [17]
- Nsaibia, H (2024), "The Sahel: A Deadly New Era in the Decades-Long Conflict", ACLED, 17 January, <https://acleddata.com/conflict-watchlist-2024/sahel/>. [9]
- Nsaibia, H (2018), "Targeting of the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS)", ACLED, 21 March <https://acleddata.com/2018/03/21/targeting-of-the-islamic-state-in-the-greater-sahara-isgs/>. [23]
- Nsaibia, H. and C. Weiss (2020), "The End of the Sahelian Anomaly: How the Global Conflict between the Islamic State and al-Qa'ida Finally Came to West Africa", *Combating Terrorism Center Sentinel*, Vol. 13, No. 7, pp. 1-14. [26]
- OECD/SWAC (2023), *Urbanisation and Conflicts in North and West Africa*, West African Studies, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/3fc68183-en>. [29]
- OECD/SWAC (2021), *Conflict Networks in North and West Africa*, West African Studies, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/896e3eca-en>. [15]
- OECD/SWAC (2020), *The Geography of Conflict in North and West Africa*, West African Studies, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/02181039-en>. [2]
- Raleigh, C., H. Nsaibia and C. Dowd (2021), "Briefing: The Sahel crisis since 2021", *African Affairs*, Vol. 120, No. 478, pp.123-143. [33]
- RFI (2023), "Mali: Iyad Ag Ghaly rencontre les groupes signataires de l'accord de paix près de Kidal", 30 January. [27]
- Roger, B. (2023), "Au Burkina Faso, une 'hécatombe' lors de l'attaque de Djibo", *Jeune Afrique*, 28 November. [31]
- Studio Kalangou (2023), "Le Général de Brigade Abdourahamane Tiani à la tête du CNSP", 28 July. [12]
- Thurston, A. (2020), "Jihadists of North Africa and the Sahel: Local politics and rebel groups", Cambridge University Press. [19]
- Thurston, A. (2018), "Boko Haram: The history of an African jihadist movement", Princeton University Press. [10]
- Wilén, N. (2022), "The Impact of Security Force Assistance in Niger: Meddling with Borders", *International Affairs*, Vol.98, No. 4, pp. 1405-1421. [21]
- Zelin, A. (2023), "The Future of Homeland Security: Addressing the Rise of Terrorism in Africa", Testimony before the House Committee on Homeland Security, Subcommittee on Counterterrorism, Law Enforcement, and Intelligence, 27 September, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/media/6790>. [4]



## **WEST AFRICAN PAPERS**

### **MILITARY COUPS, JIHADISM AND INSECURITY IN THE CENTRAL SAHEL**

This paper examines the interactions between the 2020-23 Sahelian coups and the trajectories of jihadism and insecurity, covering three countries: Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger. First, it examines pre-coup trends in violence. Second, the paper finds that coup-makers' policy choices have accelerated the worsening of violence beyond the pre-coup baseline trend, especially when coup-makers authorise new actors to commit violence, although trends in violence remain somewhat erratic and are even more complex at the sub-national level. Third, it offers an ambivalent finding on the impact of the withdrawal of the French Operation Barkhane following Mali's second coup in 2021. Finally, the paper discusses the apparent strategies of the region's two main jihadist groups, which have largely continued their pre-coup strategies, but have also responded to new conflict actors and pursued certain opportunities for increased territorial influence.