Security Council (SC)
Topic 3: Security threats in West Africa and the Sahel
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Contents

1. Definition of Key Terms

Sahel: a region in sub-Saharan Africa, stretching between the Sahara Desert to the north, the Sudanese savannah to the south, the Atlantic Ocean to the west, and the Red Sea to the east. It encompasses the countries of Gambia, Senegal, the southern part of Mauritania, Sudan, Algeria, Niger, Burkina Faso, the northern part of Nigeria, Cameroon, South Sudan, and Eritrea, as well as the central part of Chad and Mali. This area has historically been and continues to be prone to famine and drought.

Al-Qaeda: a terrorist organization founded on August 11, 1988, based on Islamist ideology and led by Osama Bin Laden until 2011. It gained international notoriety due to the terrorist attacks on the Twin Towers that occurred on September 11, 2001. The group's activities involve suicide or murder attacks using explosives against various targets. Additionally, individuals intending to carry out attacks must pledge allegiance to Osama Bin Laden. Al-Qaeda's primary objective is to counter the influence of Western countries on Muslim nations and establish a new Islamic caliphate.

Caliphate: a form of monarchical government led by an Islamic steward known as a "caliph." The caliph is considered both a political and religious successor to the Islamic prophet Muhammad and aspires to govern the entire Muslim world. It's important to note that not all Muslim states have had caliphates.

Jihadism: a neologism used to describe militant Islamic movements perceived as threats to the West. It applies to various insurgent Islamic extremists, militants, and terrorists, which can be individuals or organizations. The term is rooted in the ideology encapsulated by "jihad," meaning "struggling" or "striving." Jihad refers to the effort each individual exerts to conform to God's guidance, adhere to moral principles supported by the Muslim community, and resist one's evil inclinations. Specifically, the Sahel region has progressively emerged as the epicenter of jihadi terrorism.

2. Introduction

The growing terrorism threat and changing security landscape in West Africa and the Sahel are significant concerns. The security situation in much of the subregion remains critical, especially in large parts of the Sahel, which continue to face ongoing attacks by al-Qaeda and Islamic State-affiliated groups, as well as inter-communal fighting. Terrorism originating from the Sahel increasingly poses a threat to coastal West African countries, including Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, and Togo.

Additionally, an African branch of the Islamic State, once considered an afterthought for the main organization, is gaining strength. It is expanding its ranks and controlling more territory than ever since its establishment in 2015. Experts note that this is part of the Islamic State's shift from its traditional strongholds in Iraq and Syria to Africa. The Islamic State-Sahel region is gaining influence in parts of Mali and Niger, and to a lesser extent, Burkina Faso. This is partly due to a security vacuum created by the reduction of Western military assistance, particularly the departure of French forces compelled to end their missions by junta leaders, and the closure of the U.N. peacekeeping mission in Mali this year.

Another contributing factor is the strategic decisions made by the Islamic State's rival group, the significantly larger al-Qaeda-affiliated Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM), which has chosen to divert its resources elsewhere following battlefield losses to the IS Sahel. This has effectively resulted in ceding large tracts of land near the border between Mali and Niger.

After gaining notoriety for brutality and indiscriminate violence, the Islamic State branch is currently shifting its focus towards governance within the towns and villages under its control. Since the death of Islamic State emir Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in 2019, the organization has increasingly prioritized its African regions, including its branches in Somalia, the Democratic Republic of Congo, around Lake Chad, and elsewhere in the Sahel zone, which spans across the continent below the Sahara Desert.

Furthermore, the Islamic State Sahel Province, previously consisting of only a few combatants, has recently garnered more attention from the Islamic State Headquarters. In fact, the number of combatants has significantly increased, reaching several thousand in the past years.
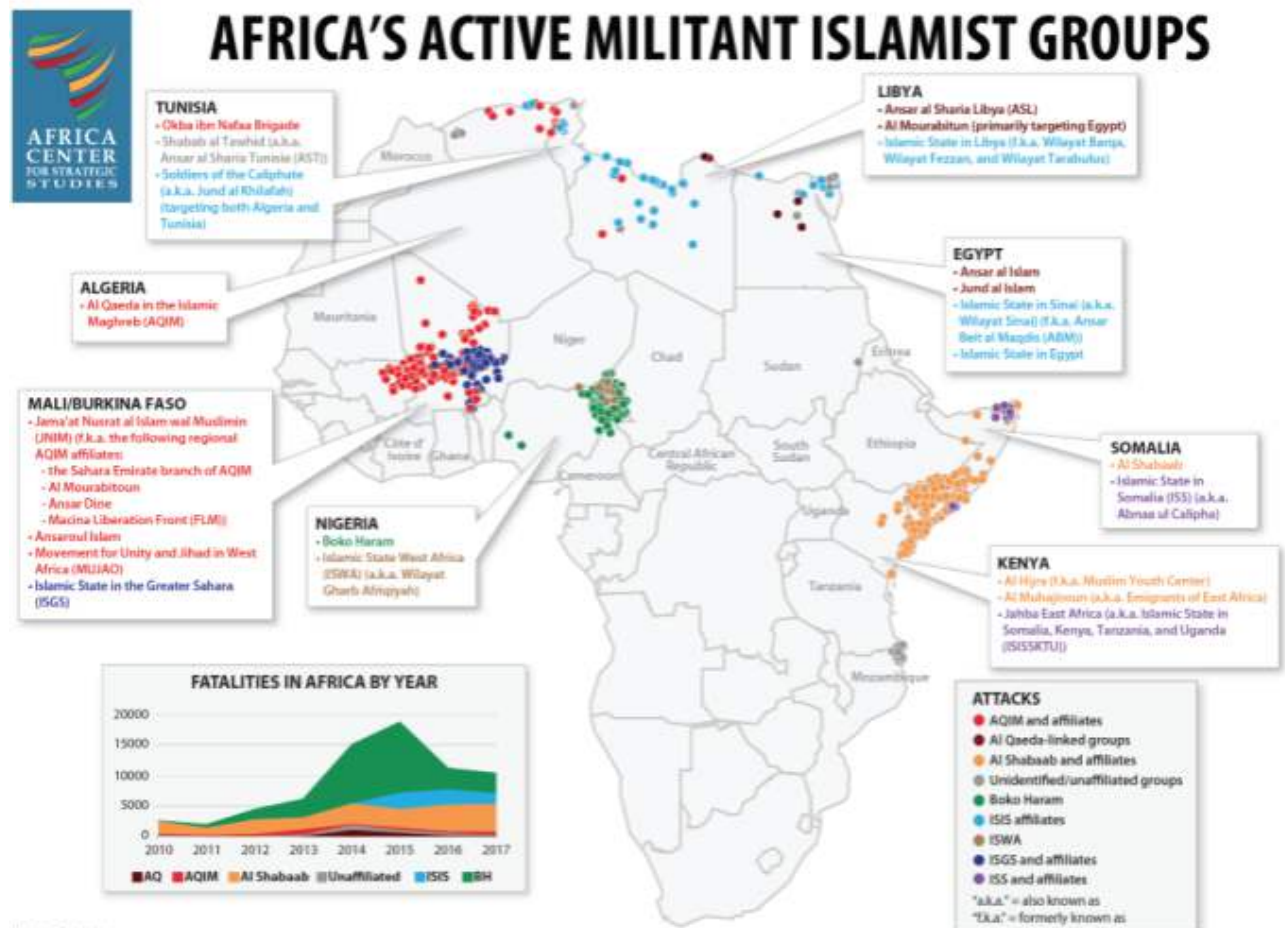
3. Background Information

Since 2007, the Sahel region, which had already been influenced by the presence of Al-Qaeda cells since 2001, has witnessed a rise in the terrorist threat of a radical Islamist nature, particularly in the north-western zone encompassing Mauritania, Mali, Niger, and southern Algeria. The presence of Al-Qaeda groups, particularly within the Islamic Maghreb, is established throughout the central and western areas of the Sahel. In the 2000s, terrorist forces were responsible for the abduction and killing of tourists, negotiators, Algerian and Malian officials, as well as attacks on the Israeli embassy in Nouakchott, the capital of Mauritania, in 2008, and on the French embassy in the same city the following year. In July 2010, Malian forces, assisted by French troops, launched a military operation against insurgent forces, and a similar operation was repeated in June 2011.

Furthermore, during a summit on January 15, 2014, the states of Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Chad collaborated and formed the G5 Sahel to monitor regional developments and security policies.

In recent years, there has been an almost 50% increase in violence and terrorist attacks, often characterized by takeovers led by military juntas connected to Al-Qaeda. The terrorist group Ansar al-Sunna has carried out attacks along the coast of Mozambique in Afungi, driven in part by the discovery of large natural gas reserves, the presence of gold and ruby mines in Niassa and Montepuez, and significant heroin trafficking from Pakistan.

These attacks, originating from the Afungi area, have spread across borders and are primarily carried out by groups like "Ahlu Sunnah Wa-jama (ISIS Mozambique)," which is of Salafist-jihadist inspiration and mainly operates in the northern part of the country. The increasing intensity and brutality of the attacks suggest a potential intention to seize territory and establish a caliphate led by extremists.

Notably, entire communities have decided to align with the Islamic State, possibly due to attraction towards its ideology, coupled with a lack of governance and resources, making it difficult for citizens to relocate and rebuild their lives elsewhere.

4. Major countries involved

Mali
Mali appears to be primarily focused on military actions, neglecting other potential solutions to address the issue of terrorism and not adequately addressing human rights concerns or promoting development.

Niger
Niger initially had support from the United States and Europe against Islamic extremism, with protection from French forces. However, after a coup, both American cooperation and French assistance were abandoned, leading to a significant increase in violence by the Islamic State's Sahel branch, resulting in a quadrupling of attacks on civilians within a month after the coup.

Burkina Faso
Burkina Faso is grappling with widespread terrorist violence that spilled over from Mali. The

government aims to double the number of volunteers in the civil defense militia to reclaim territories lost to terrorists since 2015. Additionally, Burkina Faso faces challenges such as famine, widespread food insecurity, and a rising death toll from violent attacks and coups affiliated with Al-Qaeda since 2018.

Nigeria

Nigeria is grappling with multiple security crises, conflicts, and attacks, primarily instigated by the terrorist group "Boko Haram." As mentioned earlier regarding Mali, Nigeria lacks a proper regional strategy and sufficient resources to effectively combat this phenomenon.

Senegal

Senegal is marked by numerous insurrections and clashes stemming from political problems and tension. An African branch of the Islamic State is gaining strength in Senegal, rapidly expanding to acquire and control as much territory as possible.

France

France collaborated with the Sahel countries, alongside Italy, to prevent terrorist attacks. This anti-terrorism model officially concluded when French troops were compelled to withdraw from Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso, sparking conflicts between military regimes and jihadist groups.

5. Timeline of events

2001: Establishment of the first Al-Qaeda cells.

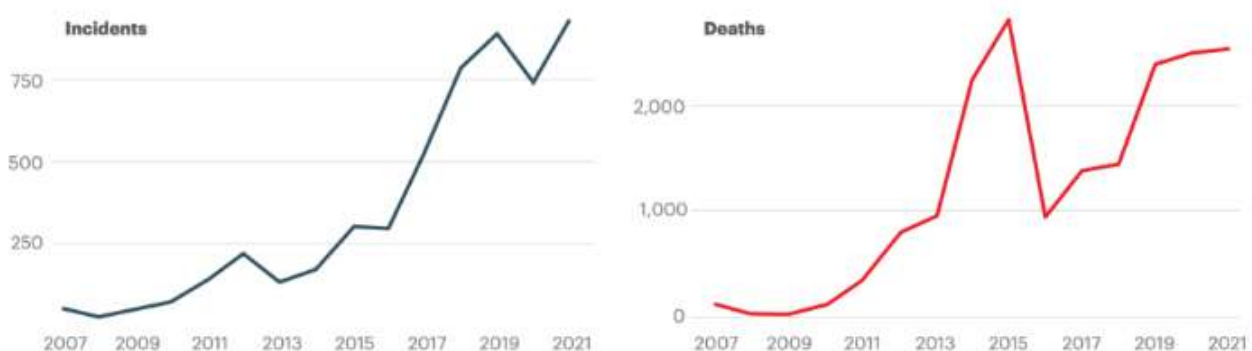**2007:** Surge in the terrorist emergency.

2008: Assault on the Israeli government office in the Mauritanian capital.

2010: Military operation against rebel forces in Mali.

2014: Formation of the G5 Sahel (G5S), consisting of the states of Mali, Niger, Chad, Mauritania, and Burkina Faso.

Incidents and deaths from terrorism in the Sahel, 2007–2021

Both incidents and deaths increased by well over 1,000 per cent from 2007 to 2021.

6. Useful Links

- https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/monthly-forecast/2023-07/west-africa-and-the-sahel-10.php#:~:text=The%20expanding%20terrorism%20threat%20and,from%20Mali%20to%20the%20region

- https://www.oecd.org/swac/topics/security/

- https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/sahel-now-accounts-43-global-terrorism-deaths

- https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/violent-extremism-sahel

7. Bibliography

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- https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/12/01/islamic-state-sahel-africa/

- https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/10/30/niger-coup-islamist-militant-extremism/