**[Turbulent Sahel](https://www.dawn.com/news/1823651/turbulent-sahel)**

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THE Sahel, a vast stretch of land below the Sahara and extending from Burkina Faso to Eritrea, has become the global epicentre of terrorism. The Global Terrorism Index reports that in 2022, this region witnessed more terrorism-related fatalities than both South Asia and the Middle East and North Africa combined, underscoring a grim escalation in violence. A staggering 65 per cent of terrorist attacks targeted 10 countries within the Sahel, marking it as a focal point of global concern.

Amid this backdrop of escalating violence, the humanitarian situation in the Sahel is becoming increasingly dire. Over 33 million people in the region are in desperate need of life-saving assistance, grappling with the repercussions of intensified conflict and insecurity. The educational infrastructure has also taken a massive hit, with the UN reporting more than 10,000 schools shuttered, affecting millions of children and undermining future prospects for stability and prosperity.

The year 2022 spotlighted the Sahel in the global terrorism landscape, with four out of the 10 countries most affected by terrorism found in this region. Terrorism fatalities in the Sahel accounted for 43pc of the global total, a stark rise from just 1pc in 2007. Burkina Faso registered the largest increase in terrorism-related deaths during the year, rising from 759 to 1,135. The country, along with Mali, in particular, has become a hotbed of terrorism, accounting for 73pc of terrorism-related deaths in the Sahel in 2022, and 52pc of all such deaths in sub-Saharan Africa. Most attacks in the Sahel are attributed to unknown groups, though both IS and JNIM (Jama’at Nusrat al-Islam wa al-Muslimeen) are active there.

The complex challenges exacerbating the security situation include political instability, food shortages, ethnic tensions, rapid population growth, environmental degradation, etc. The region harbours 58pc of the global population facing food insecurity, with its countries languishing at the bottom of the Human Development Index. These factors together contribute to a fertile ground for terrorism and conflict.

The Sahel’s trajectory is a critical concern.

The operational strategies of militants in the Sahel mirror those seen in other conflict zones, with groups exploiting weak governance and rural vulnerabilities to enforce control. The shifting dynamics of terrorism from north-eastern Nigeria to the Mali-Burkina Faso-Niger tri-border area, alongside the spread to coastal West Africa, illustrate the evolving and expansive nature of the threat. The departure of French forces from Mali has led to a surge in violence, highlighting the Sahel’s geopolitical significance and the international ramifications of local conflicts.

Militant groups in the Sahel are broadly categorised into local and transnational factions, with the latter including affiliates of Al Qaeda and IS. These groups have exploited the region’s political instability to recruit members and expand their influence. The formation of JNIM, an umbrella organisation for Salafi-jihadist groups, marks a strategic attempt to consolidate various factions under a unified command, aiming to challenge regional states and international interests.

The political landscape in the Sahel has been further destabilised by a spate of military coups, attributed to widespread dissatisfaction with governance and economic conditions. These coups, while promising reform, often exacerbate the underlying issues that fuel extremism and conflict.

Environmental challenges and rapid population growth compound the Sahel’s security dilemmas. The Ecological Threat Report by the Institute for Eco­nomics and Peace highlights severe water and food risks, stressing urgent comprehensive strategies to add­ress these thr­eats. With some countries in the Sahel projected to experience dramatic population increases, the pressures on already scarce resources will intensify, and may fuel further conflict and displacement.

Addressing the crisis in the Sahel demands a multidimensional strategy that extends beyond military solutions. Efforts to deradicalise and prevent the recruitment of the region’s youth are essential, considering the Sahel’s demographic profile with 64pc of the population under 25. Building an inclusive social contract between governments and their citizens is crucial to addressing grievances and restoring trust, which are fundamental to achieving lasting peace.

The Sahel’s trajectory is a critical concern for both regional and global security. For any long-term plan, preventing violent extremism is the best antidote to defeat terrorism. The world must prioritise a coordinated, comprehensive response that tackles the root causes of instability, from governance failures to socioeconomic disparities, to reverse the tide of violence and terror in the region.

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