Transnational extremist organizations operating in the Sahel and West Africa have gained prominence amid a toxic cocktail of crises and an intricate web of militant rivalries. The rash of deadly attacks in the region by terrorist groups demonstrates the deep reach of militant groups affiliated with Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and the self-proclaimed Islamic State (IS). These networks of extremist militancy are often embedded in shifting alliances of ‘convenience’ with complex lines of cooperation and competition traversing a highly contested landscape. As militant groups shift and morph into new offshoots and affiliates groups, their threat to the Sahel Sahara and West Africa expands, affecting countries hitherto spared from terrorist violence. The groups’ menace is further amplified by the pervasive distrust of state institutions, particularly in marginalized rural communities, and by heavy-handed and indiscriminate counter-terrorism operations. Militant groups and their parent organizations thrive on the backs of disillusioned clans, communal and ethnic organizations. They have repeatedly proven adept at exploiting long-simmering communal distrust, local conflicts, and regional rivalries.

Evolution of Violent Militancy

The rise of violent militancy in the Sahel Sahara is the outcome of armed Islamist insurgency that was unleashed in Algeria in 1992, after the military-controlled government nullified the country’s first multi-party parliamentary elections won by Islamists. This resulted in one of the most brutal and dirty civil wars that the region has ever experienced. Unfortunately for Algeria’s fragile Sahelian neighbors, the ruthless emasculation of the armed insurgency in the late 1990's had inevitable spillover effects. The ending of the insurgency in Algeria forced the geographic repositioning of its base area and theater of operations, leading to the spread of violence to other parts of the Sahel Sahara region.

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RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Governments should focus on developing policies** aimed at curtailing state corruption, promoting good governance of land and natural resources, and investing in long neglected rural and pastoral economies in order to restore people’s livelihoods.

- **Invest massively in expanding access** to education and social protection systems targeted at the most vulnerable populations as a strategy for significantly reducing social tensions.

- **Rather than focus exclusively on counter-terrorism**, foreign aid should equally be deployed towards promoting accountability, social justice and inclusive development.

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The introduction of the Al Qaeda franchise in the region in 2007 allowed the gradual development of Algerian-centric militancy into a broader regional phenomenon. Affiliates of Al Qaeda sprang up in local settings divided by ethno-racial differences, as well as fierce competition over shrinking resources. The groups skillfully exploited opportunities created by festering local conflicts, separatist tensions, the proliferation of criminal networks and lingering geopolitical distrust between neighboring countries. The weakening state authority in marginalized peripheries or remote borderlands and the decline in the capacity of the traditional elite to resolve conflicts linked to the 2011 political upheavals across North Africa exacerbated the conditions that aided the expansion of AQIM and its affiliates. State collapse in Libya and the political crisis that culminated in a coup in Mali in 2012 enabled AQIM to transform its hidden bases in the Sahel Sahara into hubs for regional militancy. A dramatic demonstration of this development was the hijacking of a local Tuareg insurgency launched by a separatist group known as the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA) by a group of AQIM-affiliated militants.

Realignment of the Militant Landscape
This rapid rise to prominence fed into the fragmentation of militant groups. Long-simmering tensions between AQIM’s central leadership based in the Kabylia Mountains in Northern Algeria and its Saharan Katibas or brigades degenerated into fractious disputes over authority, strategy, tactics, and allocation of revenues from kidnapping for ransoms and racketeering. The French-led intervention in January 2013 further destabilized AQIM. It pulverized the organization’s already weak chain of command and control, and eliminated a number of its field commanders and operatives. The penetration of, and expansion of IS franchises into the Sahel Sahara compounded AQIM’s travails in the region.

Characteristic of its past trajectory and resourcefulness, AQIM and some of its breakaway factions put aside their differences and joined forces in the face of ever-shifting allegiances and rivalries. The successive deadly assaults against soft targets in Mali (November 2015), Burkina Faso (January 2016) and Côte d’Ivoire (March 2016) have proved the value of this realignment of relations between militant groups. However, it remains to be seen how long the latest alliances will last before competing leadership egos and factional interests flare up again. For now, the expansion of the theater of operations beyond the trans-Saharan regions of the Sahel and Maghreb demonstrates the groups’ renewed transnational mobility, and relative ability to outpace American and French anti-terrorism efforts. The immediate results of this comeback can be seen in the gradual replenishing of the groups from the ranks of disgruntled groups in marginalized rural areas. For example, angry nomadic Fulani are featuring prominently in recent terrorist violence in West Africa.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

It is unclear how the ongoing transformations within the landscape of militancy will affect the fragile stability of the Sahel and West Africa. The degrees of vulnerability and resilience vary within the region. But all countries of the region share the same sources of structural fragility: weakness of public institutions, growing demographic challenges, youth unemployment, dysfunction in the agricultural sector, rural poverty, tensions over access to, and management of shrinking resources, exacerbation of ethno-racial fractures, and proliferation of small arms and mafia-like networks. These factors, compounded by the absence of the state in rural contexts, and the crisis-riven regional environment stretching from Libya to the Lake Chad basin, provide fertile recruitment grounds for community-based militias, armed predators, criminal networks and violent extremist organizations.

To address these emerging insecurities, national governments and their international partners need to re-evaluate and re-orient their ‘militarist’ counter-terrorism policies. It is recommended that:

- Governments should focus on developing policies aimed at curtailing state corruption, promoting good governance of land and natural resources, and investing in long neglected rural and pastoral economies in order to restore people’s livelihoods.
- Invest massively in expanding access to education and social protection systems targeted at the most vulnerable populations as a strategy for significantly reducing social tensions
- Rather than focus exclusively on counter-terrorism, foreign aid should equally be deployed towards promoting accountability, social justice and inclusive development.

1Samuel Nguembock, “Pourquoi la Côte d’Ivoire est-elle à son tour touchée par le terrorisme?” IRIS, March 15, 2016.

2Olivier Guitta, “The re-emergence of AQIM in Africa,” 20 March 2016

3Ibid.