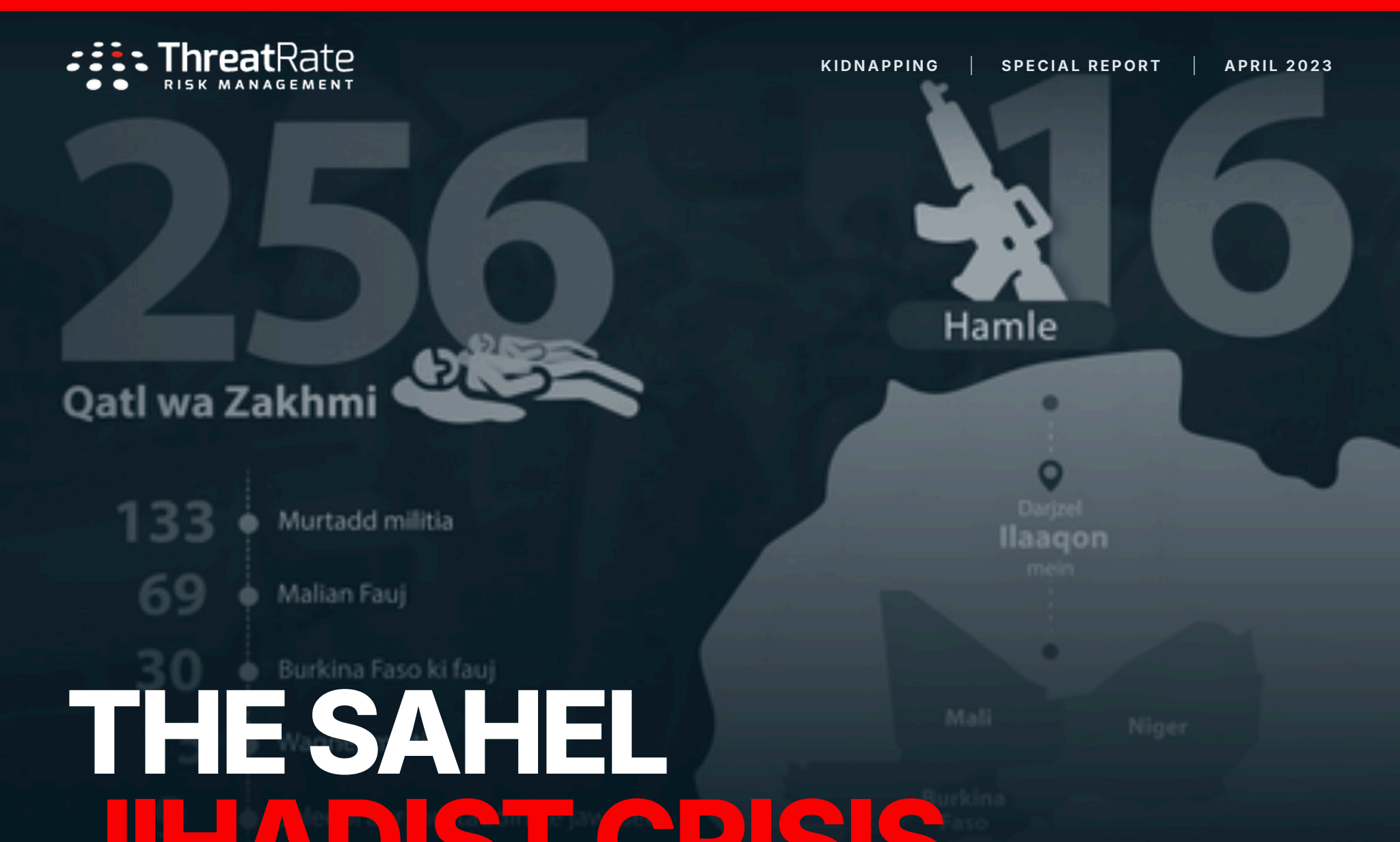


THE SAHEL JIHADIST CRISIS

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- A long history of political and economic marginalization has created a sense of frustration and resentment, which has been exploited by jihadist groups to recruit fighters and gain support.
- The overthrow of Muammar Gaddafi in 2011 led to the proliferation of weapons and the destabilization of neighboring countries, including Mali and Niger. This created a power vacuum that jihadist groups were able to exploit.
- The emergence of Boko Haram in Nigeria in the early 2000s provided a blueprint for other jihadist groups in the region. Boko Haram's success in recruiting fighters and launching attacks inspired similar groups to emerge in Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, and beyond.
- The Sahel region is particularly vulnerable to the effects of climate change, including droughts, floods, and soil degradation. These environmental challenges have contributed to food insecurity and poverty, which have in turn fueled social unrest and conflict.
- The well trained and equipped French troops withdrawal from Mali and Burkina Faso will further deteriorate the security situation.
- The developments in the Sahel, which are the product of both local and global dynamics will remain substantial challenges for the foreseeable future.

The Sahel, “shore” in Arabic, is a largely semi-arid belt of unfertile, sandy and rock-strewn that stretches over 5,400 km/ 3375 miles and is about 1,000 km/ 625 miles wide in some places across the continent. Though the geographic definitions vary, but commonly, the Sahel stretches from Senegal on the Atlantic coast, through parts of Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Nigeria, Chad and Sudan to Eritrea on the Red Sea coast.

Home to diverse ethnic groups, including the Fulani, Tuareg, Hausa, and Songhai, the Sahel faces many challenges, including desertification, drought, poverty, and political instability. These challenges have been exacerbated by both local and global dynamics that will remain substantial challenges for the foreseeable future.

A long history of complex mix of factors, including poverty, high unemployment, weak governance, political instability, ethnic tensions, and climate change, created perfect recruiting opportunities for Jihadist groups such as Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS).

Political and economic marginalization, with many communities feeling excluded from decision-making processes and development opportunities has created a sense of frustration and resentment, which has been exploited by jihadist groups to recruit fighters and gain support, particularly in parts of Mali, Burkina Faso and the Niger.

These groups have established a foothold in the region and carry out attacks against military and civilian targets alike. Some of the groups often cooperate and collaborate with each other, making it difficult for governments and international organizations to address the crisis.

The ongoing crisis has resulted in the deaths of thousands of people

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and displacement of millions, with many forced to flee their homes due to violence and insecurity. It has also had a devastating impact on the region's economy, making it difficult for people to access basic services such as healthcare and education.

The growing jihadist terrorism across the region has put the Sahel in the global spotlight in recent years with near weekly attacks on both military targets and civilians.

The late 2011 rebellion by the National Movement for the Liberation of the Azawad (MNLA) in Mali was a significant milestone for the region's militants' groups. The MNLA, an ethnic Tuareg group had joined hands with several Islamist militant groups and launched attacks on towns northern Mali, officially ending a shaky peace accord between Tuareg groups and the government.

Struggling to contain the advancing MNLA coalition, Malian military commanders grew more frustrated with the government, blaming it for not providing the troops with proper weapons and equipment, launched a coup d'état in late March 2012 effectively ending two decades of democratic rule in Mali. The coup was followed by another failed coup which further destabilized the situation.

Taking advantage of the chaotic situation in Bamako, the Tuareg rebels aided by the Jihadists militant groups, took over northern Mali locally known as the Azawad region and declared independence.

However, shortly after the fall of the north, the ideological differences among the rebel groups led to cracks in their coalition. Unlike the nationalistic MNLA, the Ansar al Din, Ansarul Islam, the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO) and the al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), which had greater presence in the occupied territory---were not in favor of an independent northern state--- but wanted to impose Islamic Sharia law throughout Mali. Assessing the Islamist groups as long-term liability, the MNLA distanced itself from these groups and engaged in mediation talks with regional leaders and Malian officials.

In mid-November 2012, the tensions between the MNLA and the Islamist militants turned into an all-open armed conflict with the latter winning territory from the MNLA including the city of Gao, which the group considered as the capital of the independent Azawad Tuareg homeland. MNLA rebels also held talks with French foreign ministry officials whom they asked for help to combat the Islamist groups.

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Fearing that the Islamist militants will destabilize the entire region, diplomats and military officials from France, the U.S., the U.N., the European Union, the African Union and ECOWAS and regional leaders have strategized a military intervention. In early January 2013, the French military began operations against the jihadists. Forces from other African Union states were deployed shortly after.

While the French-led intervention was able to push back the jihadist groups, the situation in Mali has remained unstable. In 2020, yet another military coup overthrew the elected government of President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita, which was widely seen as a result of the government's failure to address the jihadist crisis and the ongoing corruption and economic problems in the country.

Frustrated by loss of territory to the militants, who are currently control about a third of the country, the Malian junta government wove closer ties with Moscow, bringing in the pro-Kremlin Wagner

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group that France and its allies condemned as hired mercenaries. In January 2022 the Junta government expelled the French ambassador to Bamako and ordered the departure of French troops from the country, which was completed in August of the same year effectively ending its nine-year operation in Mali.

In Burkina Faso, the jihadist crisis began in 2015, when the Islamist group Ansarul Islam emerged in the north of the country. Since then, the situation has deteriorated rapidly, with multiple jihadist groups, including AQIM and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), launching attacks across the country. More than 10,000 people have lost their lives since jihadists swept in from neighboring Mali.

The government has struggled to contain the crisis, and in 2019, there was a coup that overthrew President Blaise Compaore, who had ruled the country for 27 years. While the coup was not directly related to the jihadist crisis, it highlighted the fragility of the country's political situation. Repercussions from the militant violence led to army officers two successive coups in 2022. The Burkinabe followed the Malian junta government and in January 2023 asked the French military to leave the country within four weeks. Despite recent denials, Burkina Faso has courted Russian support which likely will include deployment of Wagner Group mercenaries.

In Niger, the third most affected country, the jihadist crisis has also escalated rapidly in recent years, with multiple attacks by AQIM and ISGS, particularly in the western and southwestern regions of the country. The government has responded with a military crackdown, but this has led to accusations of human rights abuses and has not been effective in containing the crisis. In 2021, there was an attempted coup in Niger, which was foiled by the military, but it highlighted the ongoing political instability in the country.

Since 2018 the Sahelian jihadists have intruded and occupied Park W, a huge nature reserve, located on the tri-border of Benin, Burkina Faso and Niger, transforming it into a launchpad for expansion toward the West African savannah.

There are increasing fears in Ghana along with Gulf of Guinea neighbors Benin, Ivory Coast and Togo that the instability just over their northern borders, will extend into their territories. While Benin, Ivory Coast and Togo have already suffered attacks and incursions across their borders, Ghana thus far has escaped a direct attack. An early February 2023 incident in Ghana's northern Bawku area, drew attention to decades-long dispute between the ethnic Kusasi and Mamprusi communities that according to some experts is being exploited by jihadists to infiltrate the country.

The outlook for the Sahel crisis

The outlook for the Sahel jihadist crisis remains uncertain and complex. The conflict has been ongoing for over a decade and shows no signs of abating. While military efforts have been undertaken to combat the jihadist groups, these have been largely ineffective in quelling the violence and restoring stability to the region.

One of the main challenges facing efforts to address the Sahel jihadist crisis is the sheer scale and complexity of the conflict. The crisis involves multiple actors, including jihadist groups, criminal networks, and state actors, all of whom have different motivations and interests. Moreover, the conflict is taking place in a vast and largely inaccessible region, which makes it difficult for military forces to operate effectively.

Another major challenge is the lack of effective governance in many of the countries affected by the crisis. Corruption, political instability,

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and weak institutions have created a fertile ground for jihadist groups to operate and have undermined efforts to address the root causes of the conflict.

To address the Sahel jihadist crisis, it will be necessary to address these underlying governance challenges, and to support efforts to build strong and effective institutions.

The withdrawal of French troops from both Mali and Burkina Faso will likely create a security vacuum that could be exploited by Islamist extremist groups to launch attacks and expand their territorial control given the limited capacity of the local militaries. Furthermore, the presence of French forces has also provided a deterrent effect on extremist groups, as they know that they face a well-equipped and well-trained adversary. With the departure of French troops, extremist groups may feel emboldened to launch more attacks including the capitals of these countries and other major cities and further destabilize the entire Sahel region.

In addition to these challenges, there are also several external factors that could exacerbate the Sahel jihadist crisis in the coming years. One of these is the impact of climate change, which is expected to increase the frequency and severity of environmental shocks in the region, including droughts, floods, and soil degradation. These environmental challenges could exacerbate poverty and food insecurity and could contribute to social unrest and conflict.

There are several jihadist groups operating in the Sahel region of West Africa, which are responsible for the ongoing crisis in the region. Some of the most prominent groups include:



Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) is an umbrella group that was formed in 2017, bringing together several jihadist groups operating in the Sahel region, including the Sahara branch of al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Ansar Dine, Katibat Macina and al-Mourabitoun. The group has been involved in a range of attacks on military and civilian targets and has a significant presence in Mali.



Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) is a jihadist group that emerged in Algeria in the early 1990s. The group later expanded its operations into the Sahel region, where it has been involved in a range of criminal activities, including kidnapping for ransom and drug trafficking. AQIM has also carried out a number of high-profile attacks, including the 2013 siege of a gas plant in Algeria, which left 38 hostages dead.

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Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) is a relatively new jihadist group that emerged in 2015, following a split from AQIM. The group is active in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, where it has been involved in a range of attacks on military and civilian targets. ISGS has also carried out a number of high-profile kidnappings, including the abduction of an American aid worker in Niger in 2019.



Ansar Dine is a Malian jihadist group that emerged in 2012, during the country's political crisis. The group is linked to AQIM and has been involved in a range of attacks on military and civilian targets. Ansar Dine has also been accused of carrying out human rights abuses, including the destruction of ancient cultural sites in Mali.

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