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Prisons of Power: the Sahel insurgency worsens

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The on-going insurgency in the Sahel region, traditionally seen in Mali and Burkina Faso, is experiencing a notable expansion, potentially threatening the stability of neighbours Ghana and Benin. This increased geographic spread is partly influenced by the presence of Russia's GRU controlled 'Africa Corps', which is the new umbrella organisation encompassing the Wagner Group infantry, offering security services in exchange for mining and energy concessions.

The influence of Africa Corps complicates the already hazardous security situation, involving local insurgencies with external interests. As these insurgent groups extend their operations, they exploit local disputes and the absence of strong governance, setting the stage for wider destabilisation. The 2024 Global Terrorism Index ranked Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger within the top ten countries most affected by terrorism.

Increased attacks and spread of violence

The relentless conquest of violent extremist organisations in the Sahel, including Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimeen (JNIM), Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), and Islamic State in the West African Province (ISWAP), continues to aggravate the region's humanitarian crisis spreading chaos across the Sahel. This poses significant security and financial risk, not only to the affected countries, but also to international interests including the United States (US) and Europe. The declining counter-terrorism support, coupled with weakening regional leadership, has created a power vacuum. The anarchy that materialised in the wake of the struggle for power has allowed both recognised terrorist organisations, and other non-state actors like the Africa Corps (GRU, Wagner Group), to expand their influence dramatically.

This is evident as the insurgency broadens its reach into less traditionally affected areas such as Ghana and Benin. In these countries, reports indicate that jihadist cells are exploiting weak border controls to launch attacks aimed at destabilising local governments. The encroachments are marked by exponential increases in both the frequency and severity of reported attacks, suggesting deliberate moves by these groups to extend their operations well beyond their previous strongholds. The possible convergence of threats - from increased collaboration among terrorist organisations to alliances between terrorist and organised criminal groups (OCG's) - further intensifies the size of the threat posed.

Historic background - military coups and regional dynamics

The Sahel region (also serving as a major migration route to Europe), stretching from Senegal to Eritrea, between the Sahara and the African tropics, has faced significant security and humanitarian crises since the 1960s. With weak governance and economic challenges abound, the Sahel has seen violence and crime soar over the past ten years. The violence, centered in the Liptako-Gourma and Lake Chad Basin areas, pose rising displacement and migration threats that have affected surrounding regions and Europe.

Liptako-Gourma: located at the juncture of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, instability here followed the collapse of 2011 Libyan state, leading to steady streams of incoming weapons and infantry. Arrivals of extremists in northern Mali are said to be responsible for the Tuareg rebellion in 2012. The National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA), in a bid for autonomy, initially aligned with Islamist groups like AQIM (Al-Qaeda in the Lands of the Islamic Maghreb) but later withdrew.

A 2012 coup overthrew President Touré, leading to a collapsed state in northern Mali. Despite a 2015 peace deal with Tuareg groups excluding Islamists, Islamist groups like AQIM and MUJAO went on to move into central Mali and neighbouring areas. Islamist attacks in 2015 and 2016 included targets in Mali, Burkina Faso and Ivory Coast. ISGS emerged in 2016 in Burkina Faso, and in 2017, several al-Qaeda affiliates formed JNIM. Clashes between JNIM and ISGS have been on-going since 2020, with the former controlling areas in Mali and the latter occupying northern Burkina Faso and western Niger.

Lake Chad Basin: extremism also surged in this area, intersecting Cameroon, Chad, Niger and Nigeria, with Boko Haram's resurgence in 2009 following the assassination of its leader and members by the Nigerian police. By 2011, Boko Haram expanded its attacks, including a notable assault on the UN headquarters in Nigeria. The group went onto gain greater global attention in 2014 after abducting 276 girls from Chibok, Nigeria. In 2015, Boko Haram aligned with the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), becoming the Islamic State in the West African Province (ISWAP). After defeating a splinter faction in 2021, ISWAP now controls parts of northeastern Nigeria and Niger.

Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger were subjected to military coups from 2020 to 2023. Mali went through a two-stage insurrection in September 2020 and April 2021, which launched a new phase in its long political and security crises that began in 2012. Burkina Faso followed in 2022, with a coup in January and another in September. In Niger, there was a coup in July 2023, although the security situation could in no way be considered as severe as it had been in Mali and Burkina Faso.

In an article on the political economy in Niger published in 2015, the French-Nigerien anthropologist, Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan, theorised about why countries fall into this trap of weak governance and instability. His work identifies *"prisons of power"* with four main gatekeepers: big business; political party militants, allies and courtiers; bureaucrats; and international experts.

"Whoever comes to power must satisfy the demands of numerous interest groups", Olivier de Sardan writes. *"The elected president allocates ministries to the parties that helped elect him, the ministers must in turn distribute posts to activists, and the latter will also find small rewards for other activists in the form of service provision or small supply contracts."*

Business executives who yield political influence are seeking a return on their investment in the form of protection, tax exemptions, key government jobs for allies and contracts awarded. They are, therefore, at the heart of systemic corruption, which is directly linked to the ever-increasing cost of election campaigns in the context of widespread poverty.

Impact on civilian populations: emerging threats in Ghana and Benin

The insurgency in the Sahel, previously concentrated in Mali and Burkina Faso, could escalate pushing displaced peoples into neighbouring nations such as Ghana and Benin. In these two countries, the expansion is validated by an increase in militant activities, where jihadist cells leverage unsecured borders to stage attacks. The strategic implications are immense, affecting regional stability and posing a direct challenge to multinational corporations operating or planning to invest in these markets. The interplay between increased militant activities and local OCG's is highly likely to amplify lawlessness in the region. OCG activity is said to include human, drug, gold and oil trafficking.

GRU involvement and wider geopolitical implications

The involvement of Russia's GRU through the Africa Corps (previously known as the Wagner Group), signifies a deepening of Moscow's strategic interests in the Sahel. This group, by offering security services in exchange for mining and energy concessions, not only complicates the local security environment but also heightens geopolitical tensions. This alignment with the GRU showcases a deliberate strategy to bolster Russian influence in a region critical for its natural resources and geopolitical positioning.

On 25 November, the British government confirmed that one of the Russian Intelligence Units (GRU) is on standby to launch attacks on the UK and NATO. The Unit, quoted by a senior government cabinet minister, 29155 is known to operate as follows:

***Unit 29155 operations**: sensitive foreign operations, assassinations, attacks.*
***Areas active:** Europe, Middle East.*
***Past targets include:** Montenegro coup attempt, destabilisation attempts in Moldova, 2014 Vrbětice ammunition warehouses explosions, recruited Serbian citizens at the Partizan football club, Skripal poisoning case, US, and coalition soldiers in Afghanistan.*

The implications for European security are particularly concerning. The Sahel's proximity to Europe makes it a significant threat vector, especially as instability can fuel migration flows and serve as a conduit for transnational criminal activities, including the trafficking of arms and human beings.

In light of Russia's recent threats that seek to directly impact European nations, GRU operations could be orchestrated from the Sahel with impunity, serving as a stark warning for border security control. Furthermore, the heightened threat of extremist ideologies, and the potential proliferation of terrorist fighters landing on European soil, could make the current expanding Sahel insurgency and GRU Africa Corps control a lot more serious than has been previously considered.

Conclusion

The Sahel region's escalating insurgency, coupled with the narrative of Russia's GRU - through Africa Corps - heightens the risks not only for nearby nations but for Europe too.

The disclosed plans of the GRU to potentially launch attacks on European targets from the Sahel, serve as a harsh reminder of how interconnected and global present security challenges have become. This reality calls for an urgent, proactive approach in our intelligence and defence strategies to stay ahead of these threats at all costs.

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