SAWAB

BRIDGING GAPS:

CLIMATE ACTION AND COUNTER-EXTREMISM IN THE SAHEL REGION

This research paper is a collaborative effort between the **Sawab Center** and **Anwar Gargash Diplomatic Academy**.

🕐 **40 MIN READING**   🌐 **OCT 19ᵀᴴ, 2023 | RESEARCH**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

• The Sahel region, relentlessly impacted by recurring droughts, rapid desertification, and critical resource scarcity, has cultivated an environment ripe for unrest, vulnerability, and consequent recruitment by extremist groups. These climatic challenges have destabilized livelihoods, intensified food insecurity, and sparked mass displacement, fostering a socio-political landscape that facilitates the spread of extremist violence.

• Al Qaeda and Daesh have adeptly exploited the weaknesses stemming from climate challenges, harnessing community grievances to consolidate their influence. Amid a backdrop of state fragility, compounded by environmental issues, these groups portray themselves as seemingly viable alternatives, often providing services or protection to distressed communities. This multifaceted crisis is distinctly evidenced in the 'Sahelization' of Al Qaeda and the emergence of Daesh's affiliates in the region, where vulnerabilities, born out of climate and socioeconomic hardships, converge with the strategic objectives of these extremist entities.

• Environmental change cannot be isolated as the sole catalyst for extremism. The correlation between climate change and extremist violence is influenced significantly by an array of socio-economic and political elements in a given region. Factors such as population density, urbanization, climate resilience policies, adaptation strategies, commu-

nity resilience, governmental management of natural resources, poverty, and economic reliance on natural resources all contribute substantially to this complex interplay.

• The complex and multidimensional nature of extremist violence makes it difficult to identify climate change as the definitive cause or driver of extremism. Consequently, it is crucial to identify the context-dependent factors that influence how climate change is experienced.

• The implications of climate change have the potential to intensify the foundational triggers of extremist violence. Similarly, extremist activities and ensuing security responses can amplify a population's vulnerability to climate-related threats. However, the interaction between these factors is complex and highly context-dependent, underscoring the need for nuanced analysis and response strategies.

• More attention must be given to employing a qualitative and context-sensitive approach when studying the dynamics between climate variability and extremist violence. This will support successful and appropriate climate change mitigation and adaptation policies.

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INTRODUCTION

The Sahel region has long grappled with complex socio-political and environmental challenges. Against this backdrop, the rise of armed extremist groups, particularly Al Qaeda and Daesh, has emerged as a critical issue. This paper argues that their expansion has been significantly facilitated by a complicated interplay of factors including climate deterioration, governance failures, and socio-economic grievances. By addressing these root causes through climate action, we can uncover potential strategies for mitigating the spread of extremism in the Sahel.

Certain areas in this region have seen increasing desertification, drought, and erratic weather patterns — harsh realities of a warming world. This, in turn, has exacerbated resource scarcity, heightened competition among communities, and triggered conflicts. The resulting social instability, coupled with governance issues and socio-economic disparities, has created an environment conducive for extremist ideologies to take root and flourish.

Terrorist organizations like Al Qaeda and Daesh have deftly exploited these vulnerabilities. These groups not only offer an ideological narrative that resonates with the disenfranchised but also tangible services and a sense of security in places where the state is largely absent or ineffective. By integrating themselves with affected communities, they have managed to secure local sympathy and allegiance, thereby further deepening the region's crisis.

Understanding the drivers behind the growth of extremism is crucial for formulating an effective counter-strategy. This paper aims to examine these drivers in depth, focusing on the interplay between climate change, governance, socio-economic conditions, and the rise of extremist ideologies. Building on this analysis, it will explore how climate action strategies could help alleviate some of the core grievances that these groups exploit, potentially undermining their appeal.

We will first delve into the emergence and consolidation of Al Qaeda and Daesh in the Sahel, discussing how they have capitalized on local vulnerabilities. Subsequently, the paper will illustrate how climate change-induced crises have contributed to the region's instability, indirectly fueling the growth of extremism. Lastly, we will explore how climate change mitigation and adaptation strategies could be leveraged to counter socio-economic and political vulnerabilities, presenting a range of potential initiatives and highlighting their associated challenges.

Through this comprehensive investigation, this paper seeks to show how climate action can be integrated into broader efforts to tackle extremism in the Sahel. By addressing the root causes of this issue, we may be better positioned to disrupt the appeal of extremist ideologies, ultimately creating more stable and resilient communities. The implications of our analysis extend beyond the Sahel. The links between climate change, socio-economic vulnerabilities, and extremism are a global concern. Therefore, the efficacy of adopting climate action strategies to address the roots of radicalization and extremism in the Sahel offers valuable insights for other regions grappling with similar issues.

Moreover, a thorough exploration of this topic helps foster a more comprehensive understanding of the role that environmental and climatic factors can play in security issues. This paper thus explores the Sahel region as a critical case study within the global discourse, highlighting its significance in wider international security, development, and climate change discussions. Understanding the complex relationships between climate change and extremism necessitates in-depth research that considers various factors, including a region's reliance on natural resources, the vulnerability of these resources to climate change, and adaptability to these changes. The key lies in developing comprehensive policies that blend mitigation and adaptation actions to enhance climate change resilience.
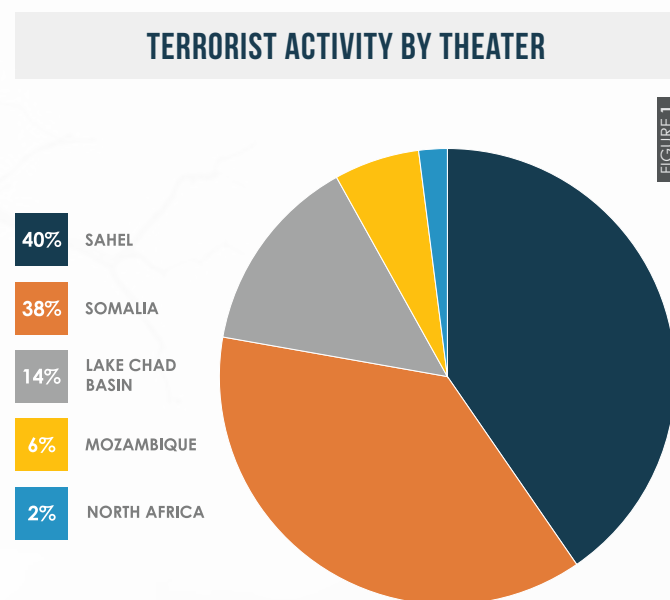
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RISE OF EXTREMISM IN THE SAHEL

As a geographical region situated at the intersection of environmental degradation and mounting extremism, the Sahel encapsulates a compelling nexus of climate change and terrorism. This complex interplay between environmental stress and extremist ideologies underpins our exploration of the rise of extremism in the Sahel, characterized by the rapid growth and spread of Al Qaeda and Daesh in the region.

Suffering from relentless droughts, rapid desertification, and acute resource scarcity, the Sahel has become a breeding ground for discontent, vulnerability, and ultimately, extremist recruitment. These climatic adversities have undermined livelihoods, aggravated food insecurity, and incited mass displacement. This, in turn, has led to social, economic, and political instability conducive to the proliferation of extremist violence.

Furthermore, extremist factions in the Sahel have capitalized on the instability engendered by climate crises, leveraging community grievances to their advantage. These groups exploit state fragility, exacerbated by the environmental challenges, to offer pseudo-alternatives, often manifesting as services or protection to the affected communities. This intersectional crisis is starkly evident in the 'Sahelization' of Al Qaeda and the emergence of Daesh's affiliates in the region, where climate-driven vulnerabilities have played into the strategic objectives of these groups.

Thus, before probing into the intricate web of extremism drivers in the Sahel through a climate action lens, it is pivotal to first dissect the genesis and evolution of both Al Qaeda and Daesh within the region. Understanding their strategic emergence and operational presence in the Sahel lays a crucial foundation for later discussion on the potential role of climate resilience as a countermeasure to the expanding influence of these extremist entities.

Africa has experienced a significant surge in extremism in the past decade. The Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED) reported[1] that 2022 witnessed 6,859 violent attacks carried out by African extremist organizations, a 22% increase compared to 2021. Meanwhile, fatalities spiked[2] by 48% last year, with terrorist groups accounting for around 19,109 deaths. The majority of these attacks (77%) took place in the Sahel and Somalia.

TERRORIST ACTIVITY BY THEATER

- 40% SAHEL
- 38% SOMALIA
- 14% LAKE CHAD BASIN
- 6% MOZAMBIQUE
- 2% NORTH AFRICA

FIGURE 1

SOURCE: ARMED CONFLICT LOCATION AND EVENT DATA PROJECT

The alarming rise in extremist violence over the past 10 years has turned the continent into the new global epicenter of terrorism. In fact, the Global Coalition to Defeat Daesh concluded[3] in June 2021 that Africa should be the new priority region for countering the extremist group. The Sahel today accounts[4] for 40% of all violent activities by extremist groups in Africa.

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1   Africa Center for Strategic Studies, "Fatalities from Militant Islamist Violence in Africa Surge by Nearly 50 Percent," February 6, 2023, https://africacenter.org/spotlight/fatalities-from-militant-islamist-violence-in-africa-surge-by-nearly-50-percent/

2   Ibid

3   Jeff Seldin, "Global Coalition Fears Islamic State Expansion in Africa," Voice of America, June 28, 2021, https://www.voanews.com/a/europe_global-coalition-fears-islamic-state-expansion-africa/6207584.html

4   Africa Center for Strategic Studies, "Fatalities from Militant Islamist Violence."

LOCALIZATION OF AL QAEDA IN THE SAHEL

The emergence of extremist groups in the Sahel can be traced back to the end of the war on terrorism in Algeria in the late 1990s. This conflict erupted after the army canceled the parliamentary election in January 1992 that the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) was poised to win[5].

The Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC), one of the main offshoots of the FIS, was founded[6] in 1998, and in 2007, it pledged allegiance to Al Qaeda, subsequently becoming known as Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM).[7] The terrorist group tapped into pre-existing networks in northern Mali, Mauritania and Chad, mostly built by the GSPC's Saharan 'emirate' leader Mokhtar Belmokhtar[8], in developing sustained and long-term alliances with several local community leaders, including Arabs and Tuaregs between 1998 and 2005. In addition to recruitment and weapons gathering, the Sahel region gave AQIM the ability to establish training camps and plot attacks against regional states.

Feeling the heat from Algeria's counter-terrorism efforts, AQIM moved most of its operations to the Sahel.[9] Here, it expanded its tactical capabilities, recruitment efforts, and its overall profile as a transnational terrorist organization. The terrorist group employed a multifaceted strategy incorporating religious, economic, and political tactics to integrate into communities in the Sahel.

Al Qaeda's local integration strategy resulted in a significant increase in Sahel recruits, starting in the late 2000s. AQIM's Algeria-based leadership had to reorganize its units in the Sahel to accommodate the rising number of fighters, leading to the creation of sub-units for members hailing from Niger, Mauritania, Mali, and Nigeria. The new recruits from the region were allowed to create, join and sometimes lead these sub-units, such as Katibat Al Ansar, Katibat Al Furquan, and Katibat Yusuf Bin Tachfine, under AQIM's supervision. This led to a significant shift in Al Qaeda's identity — from an Algerian dominated organization to a Sahel majority group. These brigades, in addition to Katibat Al Mulathameen and Katibat Tariq Ibn Ziyad, were annexed into the 'Saharan Emirate', the main AQIM branch operating exclusively in the Sahel.

AQIM'S SAHEL-BASED UNITS IN 2013
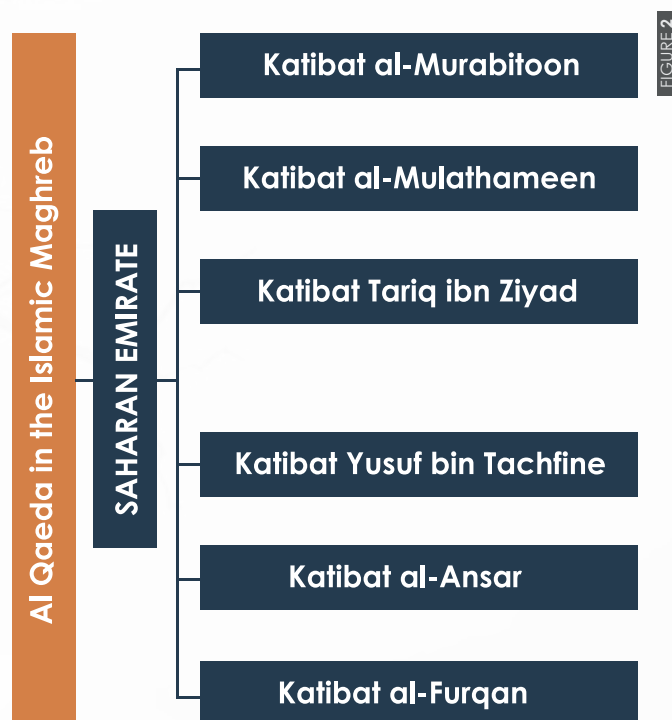
SOURCE: CTC

The 2011 Libyan crisis paved the way for the 2012 Tuareg rebellion in Mali[10] as it was exploited by AQIM and its allies. Following NATO's military intervention against his regime, Libyan leader Muammar Qaddafi sought help from the Tuareg. Although hundreds of Tuareg fighters from Mali, Niger, and the Fezzan region of Libya joined Qaddafi's fight against the rebels and NATO, their efforts were not enough to prevent the fall of the Libyan regime and, eventually, the death of Qaddafi in October 2011.

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5   Youssef M. Ibrahim, "Militant Muslims Win Algerian Vote by a Wide Margin," The New York Times, December 28, 1991, https://www.nytimes.com/1991/12/28/world/militant-muslims-win-algerian-vote-by-a-wide-margin.html

6   Jonathan Schanzer, "Algeria's GSPC and America's 'War on Terror'," The Washington Institute, October 2, 2002, https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/algerias-gspc-and-americas-war-terror

7   Mathieu Guidère, "The Tribal Allegiance System Within AQIM," Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, February 2011, https://ctc.westpoint.edu/the-tribal-allegiance-system-within-aqim/

8   Jean-Pierre Filiu, "Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb: Algerian Challenge or Global Threat?" (Carnegie Papers, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, June 2010), https://carnegieendowment.org/files/al_qaeda_sahel.pdf

9   Andre Le Sage, "The Evolving Threat of al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb," Institute for National Strategic Studies, July 2011, https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Media/News/News-Article-View/Article/1466194/the-evolving-threat-of-al-qaeda-in-the-islamic-maghreb/

10   Yahia H. Zoubir, "Qaddafi's Spawn," Foreign Affairs, July 24, 2012, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/mali/2012-07-24/qaddafis-spawn

The chaotic situation in Libya gave AQIM the opportunity to obtain weapons and recruit experienced Tuareg fighters who returned to Mali after Qaddafi's death. The turmoil in Libya also allowed AQIM to use the southwestern areas of the country as a new safe haven.[11] In fact, several reports suggest veteran AQIM terrorist Bel Mokhtar prepared the 2013 attack at Algeria's Ain Amenas gas complex from the ungoverned southwestern areas of Libya.[12]

In early 2012, the United Nations warned[13] that governments in the Sahel were facing mounting challenges due to a "spike in weapons proliferation, organized crime, and terrorism". The opportunity for AQIM to further its agenda in the Sahel arose when a coup d'etat in Mali in March 2012 triggered a Tuareg-led rebellion, led by the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA). AQIM and Ansar Dine, a Tuareg extremist group, allied with MNLA[14] and imposed a radical version of Sharia law in the country's northeast areas. Towards the end of 2012, Mali was on the verge of becoming a permanent terrorist safe haven with AQIM and its allies dangerously close to the capital Bamako. In response, France launched Operation Serval to root out armed rebels and terrorist organizations from Mali's northern territories.

The French-led intervention successfully ended the eight-month rule of Al Qaeda and its allies in northern Mali. But, a significant number of AQIM members spread throughout the region. The brief period that they were in power showed AQIM's ambition, and ability, to govern populations and territories in the Sahel.

The expansion of Ansar Dine, a primarily Tuareg terrorist organization, founded by Iyad Ag Ghali in December 2011 had also played a crucial role in demonstrating AQIM's ability to project outside its traditional strongholds. Starting from 2014, the group established several factions and expanded its operations into central Mali and later to the borderlands between Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. Not only Ansar Dine helped AQIM stretch its operations into new territories, but also played a critical role in supporting[15] the establishment of Ansaroul Islam, the first AQIM's linked terrorist group in Burkina Faso. The official emergence of the group followed their first attack on a combined French-Burkinabe military base in December 2016. Nevertheless, the group can be traced back to the Al Irshad movement, an Islamist organization led by a radical Djibo preacher named Boureima Dicko[16] and advocated unity and fraternity among local communities.

The spectacular rise of Daesh in Syria and Iraq had a profound impact on the security and ideological dynamics of the extremist landscape in the Sahel. In 2015, a faction within Al Mourabitoun, led by Adnan Abu Walid Al Sahraoui, a senior figure within the Al Qaeda linked group, switched[17] sides to Daesh and announced the creation of the "Islamic State in the Greater Sahara" (ISGS). The announcement, however, was countered by Belmokhtar,[18] co-founder of Al Murabitoun, who claimed the move had not been approved by the group's governing council.

Following these events, Belmokhtar assumed the official leadership of Al Mourabitoun and served as the group's Emir until his reported death in a US strike in Eastern Libya on November 15, 2015.[19] Meanwhile, Daesh did not recognize Al Sahraoui's allegiance until mid-October, 2016. Although Al Sahraoui's oath to Daesh "Caliph" Abu Bakr Al Baghdadi brought the rivalry between Al Qaeda and Daesh into the Sahel, Daesh played only a limited role in central Mali and conducted small-scale attacks in Burkina Faso and Niger.

11   The Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime, "Libya: A Growing Hub for Criminal Economies and Terrorist Financing in the Trans-Sahara," May 11, 2015, https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/TGIATOC-Libya_-a-growing-hub-for-Criminal-Economies-and-Terrorist-Financing-in-the-Trans-Sahara-web.pdf

12   Lee Ferran, "Algeria Hostage Crisis: The Libya Connection," ABC News, January 22, 2013, https://abcnews.go.com/blogs/headlines/2013/01/algeria-hostage-crisis-the-libya-connection

13   Ban warns of 'perfect storm' of crises confronting Sahel region of Africa," UN News, September 26, 2012, https://news.un.org/en/story/2012/09/421012

14   Stephen A. Harmon, Terror and Insurgency in the Sahara-Sahel Region: Corruption, Contraband, Jihad and the Mali War of 2012-2013, (Routledge, 2014), 16.

15   International Crisis Group. 'Burkina Faso: Stopping the Spiral of Violence.' February 24, 2020. https://www.crisisgroup.org/tr/node/12969

16   Eleanor Beevor, "JNIM in Burkina Faso: A Strategic Criminal Actor," Global Initiative, August 2022, https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/Burkina-Faso-JNIM-29-Aug-web.pdf

17   Thomas Joscelyn and Caleb Weiss, "Islamic State Recognizes Oath of Allegiance from Jihadists in Mali," Long War Journal, October 31, 2016, https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2016/10/islamic-state-recognizes-oath-of-allegiance-from-jihadists-in-west-africa.php

18   Ibid.

19   Ahmed Elumami and Peter Cooney, "Libya says 'uncatchable' veteran militant killed in U.S. strike," Reuters, June 15, 2015, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-libya-idUSKBN0OU0ZJ20150615

Furthermore, Al Qaeda and Daesh were focused on collaborating and co-existing more than fighting each other. Both groups even conducted joint-operations together against their shared enemies in the Sahel. This "Sahelian anomaly" amongst the two organizations could be explained by the shared clan, tribal, and even familial bonds between extremists of both groups. This resulted in a division of labor and geographical presence, with terrorists from Al Qaeda more active in the Niger Delta and regions around Timbuktu, Gao, and Kidal while Daesh was more present in areas around Niger and Burkina Faso.

AREAS OF CLASHES BETWEEN DAESH & JNIM
(JULY 2019- DECEMBER 2022)

SOURCE: ACLED

Nevertheless, peace didn't last long as fighters from both groups clashed for the first time in the Burkinabe border village of Ariel, sparking a series of battles between Daesh and Al Qaeda that killed hundreds of members from both sides, turning it into one of the deadliest "intra-jihadist" conflicts in the world.[20]

Facing the escalating presence of Daesh in the region, AQIM made the strategic decision to bring its various affiliates in the Sahel under one command. This merger was publicized on March 2, 2017, leading to the establishment of the 'Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims' (Jamaat Nusrat Al Islam Wal Muslimin, or

JNIM).[21] JNIM amalgamated Ansar Dine, Al Mourabitoon, and AQIM's Sahelian branch, with the leadership vested in Iyad Ag Ghaly, the veteran Tuareg leader of Ansar Dine.

In his announcement, Ghaly noted the merger of Ansar Dine, Al Mourabitoon and AQIM's Sahelian branch under one leader. This consolidation was aimed at presenting[22] a unified front against the perceived "Crusader enemy". JNIM's emergence represented a critical juncture in Al Qaeda's presence in the Sahel and Sahara of over two decades. Previously, Al Qaeda's role was primarily supportive, providing logistical aid and weapons to its Algerian branch. However, a significant shift towards a strategy of social integration marked an increased and entrenched presence in the Sahel.

The participation of native Sahelians in the extremist landscape unfolded gradually over time. Initial efforts to establish Al Qaeda in the Sahel were spearheaded by Algerians and other non-local members. The establishment of JNIM sought to address the lack of a unifying structure and cohesion among Al Qaeda's regional sub-groups. These gaps became evident after the French intervention, as various groups scrambled to control territories across Mali and the wider Sahel. Each group adopted unique strategies and tactics to administer their territories and combat both foreign and local forces. The establishment of JNIM should be perceived as a strategic imperative for AQIM, signifying a turning point in the evolution of Al Qaeda's operations in the Sahel.

France's Operation Barkhane,[23] which was started in August 2014 as a continuation of Operation Serval but with a wider geographical scope, was successful in neutralizing several key leaders of JNIM. In February 2019 and November 2020, French forces killed two senior JNIM leaders, Yahya Abu Al Hammam and Bah Ag Moussa. However, despite targeted assassinations, detentions, and advanced military operations, JNIM's extremist violence expanded southward from Mali to Burkina Faso and Niger.

20   Heni Nsaibia, "The Conflict Between Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State in the Sahel, A Year On," Italian Institute for International Political Studies, February 15, 2021, https://www.ispionline.it/en/publication/conflict-between-al-qaeda-and-islamic-state-sahel-year-29305

21   Thomas Joscelyn, "Analysis: Al Qaeda Groups Reorganize in West Africa," FDD's Long War Journal, March 13, 2017, https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2017/03/analysis-al-qaeda-groups-reorganize-in-west-africa.php

22   Ibid.

23   Operation Barkhane: Launched by France in August 2014, this anti-terrorism operation in the Sahel, in collaboration with Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger, concluded on November 9, 2022.

TERRORIST ATTACKS IN THE SAHEL & WEST AFRICA
(MARCH 2017-DECEMBER 2021)

SOURCE: ACLED

In Burkina Faso, JNIM began to assert its presence through a series of attacks. In March, the group claimed responsibility for an assault on the French embassy and the army headquarters in Ouagadougou, the Burkinabe capital. The intensity of JNIM's attacks on both military and civilian targets escalated significantly between 2018 and 2019, resulting in a 250% surge[24] in extremist violence in the country. By 2020, territorial disputes between JNIM and Daesh in the Greater Sahara reached the eastern and northern territories of Burkina Faso. Ansarul Islam, which had been facing significant pressure from Daesh since 2019, decided to align itself with JNIM, resulting in a dominant position of Al Qaeda in most parts of the country. Meanwhile, the resurgence[25] of Ansaru's violence in northwestern Nigeria in recent years, combined with JNIM's efforts to expand its geographical reach as far as countries like Togo, Benin, and Ivory Coast, confirmed Al Qaeda's strategic goal to create a continuous battleground across the Sahel and West Africa.

Ansaru adeptly established itself as a guardian of Muslim communities in northwestern and north-central Nigeria.[26] These regions have ex-

perienced a marked increase in banditry and abductions in recent years, a situation exacerbated by communal conflicts driven by competition between Muslim Fulani herders and Christian farming communities. Criminal organizations, implicated in some of the deadliest attacks in the northwestern regions of Nigeria, have contributed to this escalation of violence. Consequently, Ansaru capitalized on these conditions to expand its presence, successfully reconciling general banditry with religious extremism.

Documented reports suggest Ansaru often provided weapons and manpower to armed gangs, contributing to the so-called "jihadization of banditry". This phenomenon, involving the transformation of local criminal networks into allied groups, has become increasingly relevant in recent years, particularly for Al Qaeda's Katibat Macina in Mali and Burkina Faso, which has used Fulani criminal organizations as auxiliary forces. Similar to its Al Qaeda allies in the Sahel, Ansaru has exploited grievances to its advantage, maintaining close relationships with the broader Fulani communities in the northwest and recruiting disaffected individuals for its own purposes.

A significant factor behind the group's rapid resurgence and sustained presence in the region is its strategy of community engagement or "hearts and minds" campaign, which includes providing essential public services, protection against criminal groups, and food supplies. In terms of capabilities, Ansaru's relationship with criminal groups has bolstered its operational means. Access to weaponry, procured from these groups, has not only positioned Ansaru as a serious security threat but also extended its sphere of influence.

The progression of Al Qaeda in the Sahel region, from a primarily Algerian operation to a transnational network with extensive reach and recruits from diverse backgrounds, signifies a strategic shift in its operational methodology. The group's deliberate strategy of getting involved with local socio-political dynamics has increased its ability to withstand significant counter-terrorism efforts. Its alliances with regional factions, capacity to exploit political and social instability, and expansion into new territories have not only solidified its presence but also reshaped the region's extremist landscape.
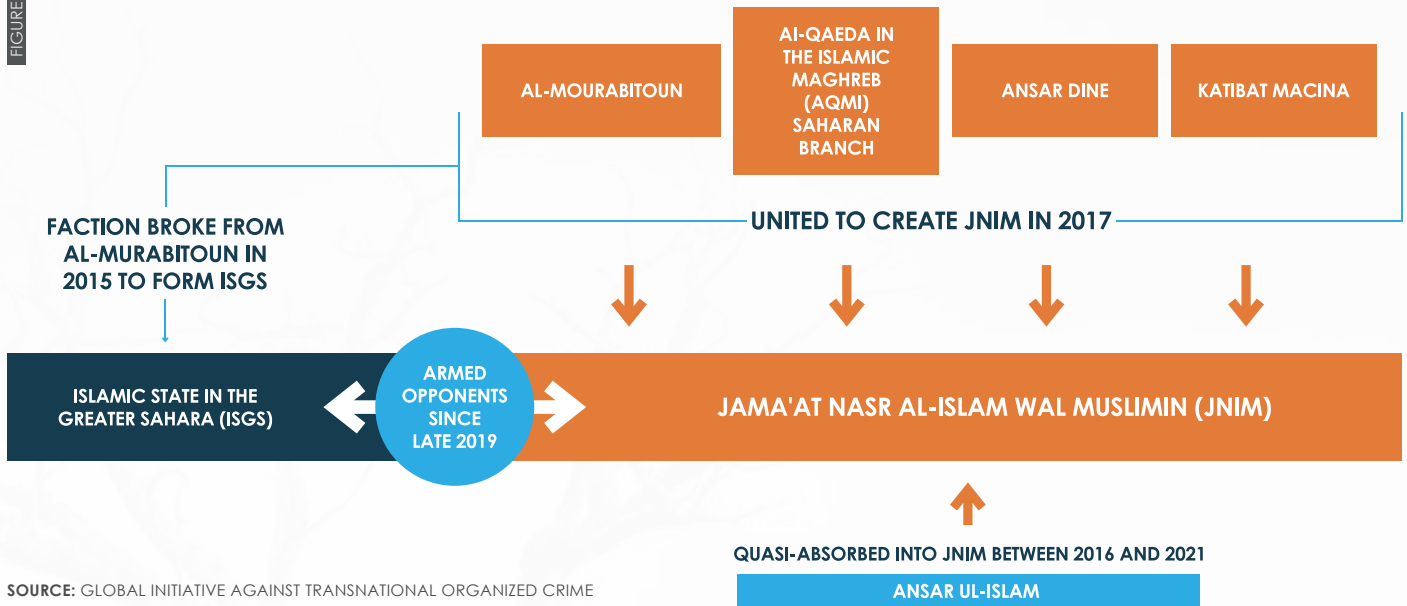
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24   "Country Reports on Terrorism 2019: Burkina Faso," U.S. Department of State, accessed on April 6, 2023, https://www.state.gov/reports/country-reports-on-terrorism-2019/burkina-faso/

25   ISS Regional Office for West Africa, 'Ansaru's comeback in Nigeria deepens the terror threat,' Institute for Security Studies Africa, February 27, 2020, https://issafrica.org/iss-today/ansarus-comeback-in-nigeria-deepens-the-terror-threat

26   Jacob Zenn and Caleb Weiss, "Ansaru Resurgent: The Rebirth of Al-Qaeda's Nigerian Franchise," Perspectives on Terrorism 15, no. 5 (October 2021): 46-58.

FIGURE 5

NETWORK OF EXTREMIST ACTORS IN MALI AND BURKINA FASO

AL-MOURABITOUN

AL-QAEDA IN THE ISLAMIC MAGHREB (AQMI) SAHARAN BRANCH

ANSAR DINE

KATIBAT MACINA

FACTION BROKE FROM AL-MURABITOUN IN 2015 TO FORM ISGS

UNITED TO CREATE JNIM IN 2017

ISLAMIC STATE IN THE GREATER SAHARA (ISGS)

ARMED OPPONENTS SINCE LATE 2019

JAMA'AT NASR AL-ISLAM WAL MUSLIMIN (JNIM)

QUASI-ABSORBED INTO JNIM BETWEEN 2016 AND 2021

ANSAR UL-ISLAM

SOURCE: GLOBAL INITIATIVE AGAINST TRANSNATIONAL ORGANIZED CRIME

Through its affiliate JNIM, in particular, Al Qaeda has become considerably more lethal and widespread. Attacks and fatalities attributed to JNIM surged to their highest levels since the group's inception in 2007. JNIM was responsible for 351 deaths in 2021, a staggering 69% increase compared to 2020. This escalation in violence also saw a 71% rise in terrorism-related incidents.[27] The distribution of these deaths underscores the expanding scope of JNIM's operations. Approximately 59% of the fatalities occurred in Mali and 40% in Burkina Faso. The group also extended its reach into Benin, where it carried out two attacks resulting in two fatalities. In Mali alone, JNIM attacks soared by 80% between 2020 and 2021.[28]

Al Qaeda's evolution in the Sahel region and its adaptive strategy offer crucial insights into what may lie in store. The group's focus on social integration, exploitation of local conflicts, and alliances with local actors have enhanced its resilience. Despite ongoing counter-terrorism operations, the complexity and fluidity of the Sahel's security landscape present Al Qaeda with opportunities to maintain its operational tempo, propagate its ideology, and exploit the region's enduring conflicts. However, the group also faces substantial challenges. The emergence of Daesh and other extremist organizations in the region, combined with relentless counter-terrorism efforts and local resistance, poses a serious threat to Al Qaeda's continued survival and influence. While its presence in the Sahel region is unlikely to wane in the near future, Al Qaeda's trajectory will likely continue to be marked by adaptation and opportunism amid fluctuating local and regional dynamics. Its future success will primarily depend on its ability to navigate these complexities, forge sustainable alliances, and retain its relevance for local communities.

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27   Institute for Economics & Peace, "Global Terrorism Index 2022: Measuring the Impact of Terrorism," (Sydney, March 2022), https://www.visionofhumanity.org/resources

28   Ibid

The deliberate strategy of Al Qaeda in the Sahel getting involved with local socio-political dynamics has increased its ability to withstand significant counter-terrorism efforts.

B DAESH'S STRATEGIC CONSOLIDATION IN THE SAHEL

The expansion of Daesh into the Sahel region was a significant development in the transnational dynamics of terrorism. Given the Sahel's geographical vastness, sociopolitical vulnerabilities, and significant security challenges, the terrorist group has gradually consolidated a new theater of operations that extends from Mali to Nigeria. As previously mentioned, Daesh's establishment in the region can be traced back to the pledge of allegiance from Al Murabitoun's senior member Al Sahraoui to Abu Bakr Al Baghdadi in May 2015, signaling the emergence of what is known as the "Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS)".

The group, which eventually merged with Daesh's "West Africa Province" (ISWAP),[29] did not carry out attacks until September 2016[30], when it targeted a Burkinabe military outpost near the border with Mali. Following this assault, the group conducted several other attacks in the border areas between Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger, including the high profile ambush of October 2017 near Tongo Tongo in Niger that killed four US and five Nigerian soldiers. The attack was described as a "total tactical surprise" by the US Africa Command. Despite this demonstration of capability by ISGS, its loyalty pledge was only officially accepted in April 2019, when Al Baghdadi appeared in a video praising Al Sahraoui and his group.

Although Daesh was severely degraded in the Middle East by 2019, losing not only every inch of its so-called caliphate but also its "Caliph" Al Baghdadi, its affiliate in the Sahel grew significantly. This growth was primarily fuelled by the organization's ability to exploit ethnic conflicts to recruit members and gain popular support. Echoing the tactics employed by Daesh's core leadership in Iraq and Syria, Daesh in West Africa used a combination of insurgent tactics, terrorist attacks, and attempts to govern territory. The group employed guerrilla tactics, and carried out suicide bombings and coordinated attacks on remote military bases and outposts. Furthermore, the use of brutal force and public executions to instill fear and assert control over territories was also at the heart of the group's playbook. In fact, the growing lethality and organizational sophistication caught the attention of Daesh's media machine (Al Naba and Amaq Agency), despite the fact that it was technically a subgroup of ISWAP. For example, ISGS appeared in nine out of 20 of Al Naba front pages between November 2019 and March 2020.[31]

The emergence of ISWAP can also be traced back to the period when ISGS was established. ISWAP is arguably one of the most lethal affiliates of Daesh. In March 2015, Abu Bakr Shekau, the leader of Ahl Al Sunnah Li Da'wah Wal Jihad (also known as Boko Haram), pledged allegiance to Al Baghdadi.[32] However, within a few years, ISWAP faced significant challenges from counterterrorism efforts and internal ideological rifts.

A notable episode in its history was the replacement of Shekau with a new emir, Abu Musab Al Barnawi, the son of the deceased Boko Haram founding leader, Muhammed Yusuf, in 2016. ISWAP claimed that the removal of Shekau was due to his excessive attacks against Muslim civilians and the non-compliance with Al Baghdadi's directives, particularly regarding his use of female suicide bombers, the excommunication of internal critics and his alleged missmanagement of ISWAP resources.

Since then, ISWAP continued its efforts to portray itself as a provider of mercy, justice and 'repentance' for Muslims. However, despite contrasting with Shekau's strategy of broadly targeting civilians, there was a gap between Daesh's rhetoric and actions on the ground as the group labeled Muslim civilians supporting the military, and providing humanitarian support, as "murtadin" (apostates) who should be fought. ISWAP's goal was also to present itself as a credible and viable alternative to the Nigerian government. The terrorist group imposed taxes on fishermen and farmers and even provided security, basic healthcare services, and price caps on goods to encourage trade.

29   The Islamic State's Strategic Trajectory in Africa: Key Takeaways from Its Attack Claims," Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, August 31, 2020.

30   Center for Preventive Action, "Violent Extremism in the Sahel," Council on Foreign Relations, last modified March 27, 2023.

31   Al Naba, issues 207, 209, 210, 213, 216, 217, 221, 222, and 226.

32   BBC News, 'Nigeria's Boko Haram Pledges Allegiance to Islamic State, March 7, 2015, sec. Africa, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-31784538

The death[33] of Al Sahraoui in a French military operation in eastern Mali in August, and the decimation of the ISGS core leadership, doesn't necessarily equate to a reduction in the threat level the group poses in the Sahel. Indeed, under a new emir, Abu Al Bara Al Sahraoui,[34] and with a seasoned cadre of local commanders, the group is displaying unsettling resilience. The changing political landscape, marked by France's military withdrawal and political shifts in Mali and Burkina Faso, further exacerbates the regional vulnerabilities ISGS is known to exploit.

It is important to note that the existing armed actors in the region, including the Malian army, the Wagner Group, JNIM, and various militias and former rebel factions, have been unable to stem the tide of Daesh's violence. The divergent interests and objectives of these forces have prevented greater pressure being mounted on Daesh, leaving room for the extremist group to continue its onslaught unimpeded, which means the threat it poses will likely persist and even amplify in the next few years.

Moreover, Daesh is forging ahead with plans to establish a "state" in rural areas extending from Gao in the north to Dori in the south, and from N'Tillit in the west to the Tahoua border region in the east. The towns of Anderamboukane, Indelimane, and Tin Hama are increasingly serving as "provinces" of this emerging proto-state, demonstrating a clear strategic plan on Daesh's part.

Going forward, it is clear Daesh militants will likely seek to increase their influence through large-scale violence and operational expansion in areas where there is limited resistance. They are thriving amidst the chaotic conflict environment. The dynamics of Daesh's persistence and expansion in the Sahel region necessitate a comprehensive and concerted response, one that transcends military strategies and addresses the socio-political conditions that have made the region fertile ground for extremism.

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33   International Crisis Group. "The Death of the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara's Leader: An Opportunity for Dialogue?" Last modified October 19, 2021. https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/sahel/la-mort-du-chef-de-letat-islamique-au-grand-sahara-une-occasion-de-dialogue

34   Global Initiative against Organized Crime. "JNIM Consolidated Its Presence in the Central Sahel in 2022, but 2023 Will Test Its Credibility as an Alternative Governance Provider." Risk Bulletin, no. 6, January 2023.

2.0

INTERLINKAGE BETWEEN EXTREMISM AND CLIMATE CHANGE

When examining the conflict-climate nexus, it is important to highlight the indicators involved, as a direct correlation between a climate change indicator and conflict can't be deduced without careful analysis. It is also important to highlight the extent to which a specific climate change indicator exacerbates a particular type of conflict. For example, a study shows that scarcity of renewable resources, such as fresh water, is more likely to affect the possibility of intragroup violence.[35]

Research has shown how climate related factors drive social and political instability, exacerbate conflict-factors, and contribute to the emergence of extremist organizations. In many instances, research attempts to highlight such a correlation in crises-hit areas.

Studies seeking correlations between climate change and extremism have sparked heated debates. Though the effect of climate change on extremist violence has not been fully understood, there has been a notable expansion in the literature on the security implications of climate change. Research has shown how climate related factors drive social and political instability, exacerbate conflict-factors, and contribute to the emergence of extremist organizations. In many instances, research attempts to highlight such a correlation in crises-hit areas such as Syria, Darfur, Sudan, the Lake Chad region, among others. In such places, one could argue that underlying geopolitical conditions, such as poor governance and institutional stability, play a significant role in the correlation between resource scarcity resulting from climate change and its role in conflict.[36] Whatever the case may be, formulating a universal theory that fits all scenarios would be difficult, given the multifaceted nature of the issue.

A CLIMATE CHANGE: THREAT MULTIPLIER FOR EXTREMISM?

While the debate surrounding the connection between climate change and extremist violence continues, a wide range of literature suggests that climate change serves as a threat multiplier. The term "threat multiplier" has become a key concept in the global debate on the interlinkage between climate change and national security[37]. The effects of climate change can worsen the underlying causes of extremist violence, amplify recruitment factors for these groups, and reshape the broader strategic environment, providing extremist organizations with increased control and maneuverability[38].

35 Koubi, V. "Climate Change and Conflict." Annual Review of Political Science (2019): 343-360.

36 Ibid., 347.

37 Baudu,P. Goodman, S. "Climate Change As A Threat Multiplier: History, Uses, and Future Of The Concept". Center for Climate & Security. Briefer no. 38. January 3, 2023. https://councilonstrategicrisks.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/38-CCThreatMultiplier.pdf

38 UNDP. "The climate security nexus and the prevention of violent extremism": Working at the intersection of major development challenges". UNDP Policy Brief.2020. https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/publications/UNDP-Climate-Security-Nex-us-and-Prevention-of-violent-extremism.pdf

In turn, extremist activity and security operations can increase a population's susceptibility to climate hazards, and in unstable environments, it can disrupt livelihoods[39], harm economic performance, and limit the feasibility of measures that strengthen climate adaptation and resilience [40].

Natural disasters like floods, droughts, hurricanes, shortages of water for irrigation, and insect infestations all interfere with agriculture production and access to natural resources. These changes make it harder for people to access the resources they need for their livelihoods, make availability less predictable, and increase competition over scarce resources. It can cause forced migration from rural to urban areas, become a driving force for displacement, increase tensions between different communities, lead to extreme poverty, and exacerbate existing causes of conflict[41]. It is argued that in the case of Syria, the anthropogenic drought caused a massive migration of people to urban areas, which in turn caused competition for the limited resources that were available and, eventually, political unrest[42].

As a direct result of this instability, violent extremist groups like Daesh and Jabhat Al Nusra were able to flourish and acquire control of regions in which they had previously been unable to operate[43].

Another study tried to determine the link between drought and violent conflict in rural regions, where local food production is susceptible to the negative effects of climate-related events[44].The study revealed that violence by non-state actors against civilians in the developing world predominantly originates in agricultural areas, which means that rebel groups depend on local agricultural resources for their operations and survival[45].

From this argument, one can deduce the scarcity of natural resources motivates extremist groups to divert existing resources for their own operations. Figure 6 represents a comprehensive depiction of this trajectory, as it highlights the roadmap connecting climate change hazards, resource competition, and displacement. This sequence is one of the primary drivers leading to violent conflicts.

39   UNDP. "Journey to Extremism in Africa: pathways to recruitment and disengagement". 2023:47. https://journey-to-extremism.undp.org/content/v2/downloads/UNDP-JourneyToExtremism-report-2023-english.pdf
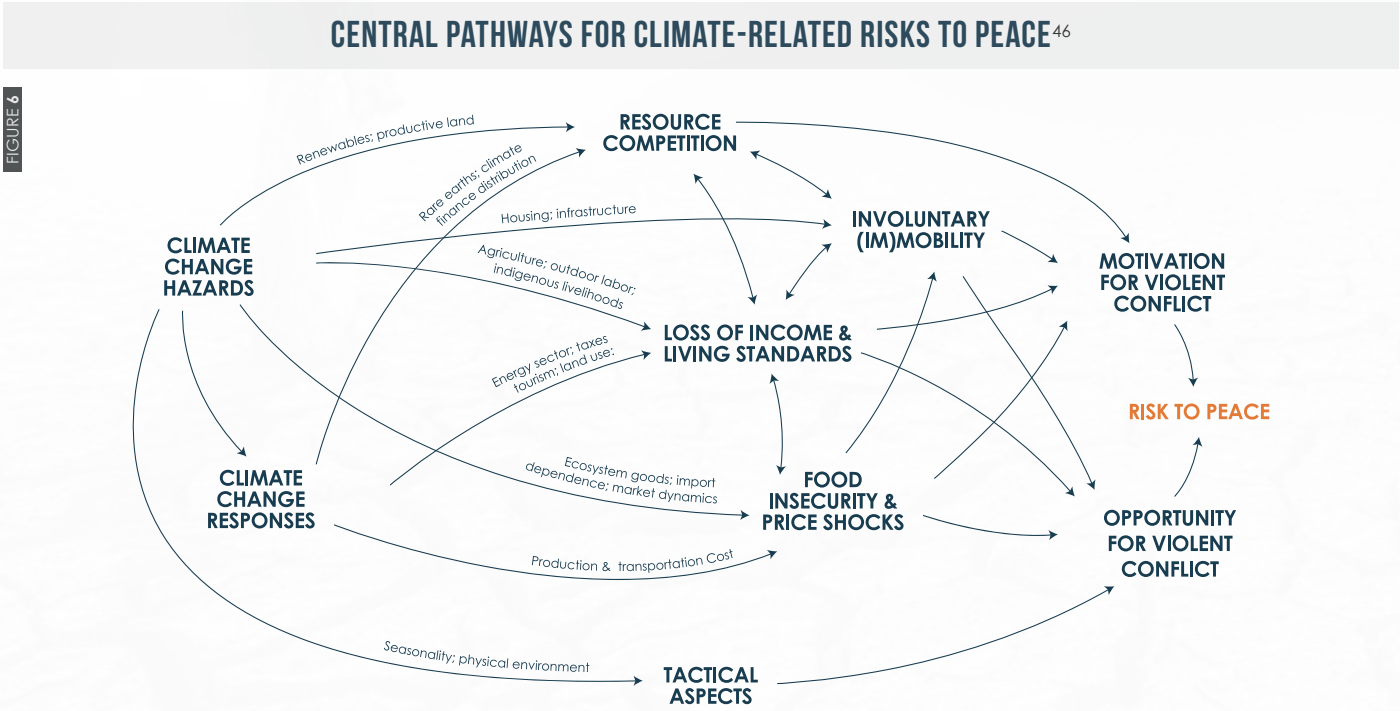
40   UNDP. 2020. p.4

41   Dieng, Adama. "The Sahel: Challenges & Opportunities" International Review of the Red Cross. 2022. April 5, 2023.

42   UNICRI. "Perceptions of climate change and violent extremism". 2022. https://unicri.it/sites/default/files/2022-10/Perceptions%20of%20climate%20change%20and%20violent%20extremism_0.pdf

43   Ibid.

44   Bagozzi BE, Koren O, Mukherjee B. "Droughts, land appropriation, and rebel violence in the developing world". J. Politics 79(3):1057–72. 2016.

45   Ibid.

CENTRAL PATHWAYS FOR CLIMATE-RELATED RISKS TO PEACE[46]

FIGURE 6

46   Buhaug, Halvard; Elisabeth Gilmore; Tor A. Benjaminsen & Cullen Hendrix. "Climate-driven risks to peace over the 21st century". Climate Risk Management. 39(100471). 2023:3.

While these studies have not yet reached a consensus on which climate change variables are more likely to intensify drivers of conflict and violence, existing literature has highlighted general connections between them. The UN has long been concerned about how climate change affects security. Discussing climate change and security at the 8,864th meeting of the Security Council in September 2021, Secretary-General António Guterres emphasized the correlation by stating: "It is clear that climate change and environmental mismanagement are risk multipliers. Where coping capacities are limited and there is high dependence on shrinking natural resources and ecosystem services, such as water and fertile land, grievances and tensions can explode, complicating efforts to prevent conflict and to sustain peace." [47] Climate change can place economic strain on governments and institutions, making it difficult, especially for overburdened governments, to react quickly and effectively. Weak responses increase climate vulnerability, and may exacerbate grievances, undermine government authority, and increase intercommunal tensions, especially over natural capital[48]. Climate change multiplies existing threats in areas that have pre-existing concerns over the inadequacy of state response, a lack of government services, and doubts over institutional legitimacy[49].

The emotions fear and anxiety experienced by communities about the future can be exploited by extremist groups to foster distrust, ensure recruitment, and incite violence against the state[50]. These groups may capitalize on this by fueling social and ethnic divisions to recruit members with false promises of survival and economic prosperity[51].

In another aspect, when the government implements climate change adaptation programs, without conducting a proper analysis

of their applicability and implications, similar detrimental effects have been observed. Projects such as dams, mass plantings, and irrigation channels, which are intended to help mitigate the effects of climate change, have also had rippling social, political, and economic consequences as well[52]. The construction of some mega dams in India, for instance, which was intended to mitigate the effects of climate change-induced droughts and flooding, resulted in the destruction of entire communities[53]. Such changes act as stressors to already fragile environments and communities, and could exacerbate any pre-existing conflicts.

Climate change acts as a threat multiplier in Africa, exacerbating existing challenges. According to the World Meteorological Organization (WMO) State of Climate in Africa (2019) report, the continent continues to experience warming temperatures, rising sea levels, and increased frequency of extreme weather and climate events. The report highlights the diverse impact of climate change throughout the region. For example, Southern Africa continues to suffer from significant drought and tropical cyclones, while the Horn of Africa region experiences increased occurrences of floods and heavy rainfall following an extended period of very dry conditions. Meanwhile, the Sahel region has been grappling with persistent flooding[54]. Such climate change effects can have an unfavorable impact on drivers of armed conflict and insecurity, especially in a continent that accounts for three quarters of the countries with the highest risk of compound state fragility and climate exposure[55].

Scholars differ on how climate change affects communal tensions in the Sahel. Most studies find a complex and indirect link between the two, due to the involvement of socio-economic, political, and historical aspects[56]. Climate change may, however, have an indirect effect on communal violence through several processes.

47   UNICRI. Perceptions of climate change and violent extremism.2022. https://unicri.it/sites/default/files/2022-10/Perceptions%20of%20climate%20change%20and%20violent%20extremism_0.pdf

48   UNDP. "The climate security nexus and the prevention of violent extremism: Working at the intersection of major development challenges". UNDP Policy Brief.New York. 2020. https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/publications/UNDP-Climate-Security-Nexus-and-Prevention-of-violent-extremism.pdf

49   Hegazi, Farah. "Climate change, disease and the legitimacy of armed non-state actors". Stockholm International Peace Research Institute. 2020. May 15, 2023. https://www.sipri.org/commentary/essay/2020/climate-change-disease-and-legitimacy-armed-non-state-actors

50   UNDP. "Journey to Extremism in Africa: pathways to recruitment and disengagement". 2023:99. https://journey-to-extremism.undp.org/content/v2/downloads/UNDP-JourneyToExtremism-report-2023-english.pdf

51   Ibid, p 111-112.

52   Schirch, Lisa."The Ecology of Violent Extremism: Perspectives on Peacebuilding and Human Security". London.Rowman & Littlefield. 2018.

53   Ibid.

54   World Meteorological Organization. "State of the Climate in Africa". Geneva. WMO No. 1253. https://library.wmo.int/doc_num.php?explnum_id=10421

55   Cater, Charles. "Toward New Policies For The Climate Change & Violent Extremism Nexus In Africa. United Nations Development Program. Extremism InFocus. Issue Brief 1. 2021: 1-3.

56   Cepero, Oriol. Desmidt, Sophie. Detges, Adrien. Tondel, Fabien. Ackern, Pia. Foong, Adrien. Volkholz, Jan. "Climate Change, Development and Security in the Central Sahel".CIDOB. 2021: 42-43.

For example, in many instances it may affect rural livelihoods by threatening local income, food security, and transhumance[57]. This, in turn, could escalate communal conflicts related to resource management practices, conflict resolution methods, managing social relations, and eventually lead to discontent with authorities[58]. In such a scenario, it may provide opportunities for armed groups to recruit impoverished farmers and herders in search of basic necessities and protection[59]. In the central Sahel region, particularly the intersection of the borders of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, climate change has exacerbated migration and resource scarcity, which in turn increases risks of extremist violence[60].

If we consider a specific example, as shown in Figure 7, the conflict in Burkina Faso led to the deaths of 1,435 people between 2015 to 2020[61]. The violence in Burkina Faso has mainly been associated with conflict between agriculturalists and pastoralists as well as the lack of effective government regulation and mediation, rather than the presumed effects of climate change[62]. A quantitative study of historical rainfall and conflict data from the past 20 years does not show any link between climate extremes, like droughts and floods, and how often violent conflicts arise between ethnic groups in Burkina Faso[63]. However, data points to an indirect effect of extreme climate events, rather than a direct link, between climate change and violence [64].

57   Ibid.

58   Acker, Pia. Detges, Adrian. "Climate change, Vulnerability, and Security in the Sahel. Three scenarios for Burkina Faso, Mali, & Niger in 2050". 2022:10-15.

59   Haan, Cees. Dubern, Etienne. Garancher, Bernard. Quintero, Catalina. Pastoralism Development in the Sahel: A Road To Stability?". World Bank Group. 2016:9-10.

60   Cater, Charles. "Toward New Policies For The Climate Change & Violent Extremism Nexus In Africa. United Nations Development Program. Extremism InFocus. Issue Brief 1. 2021:3.
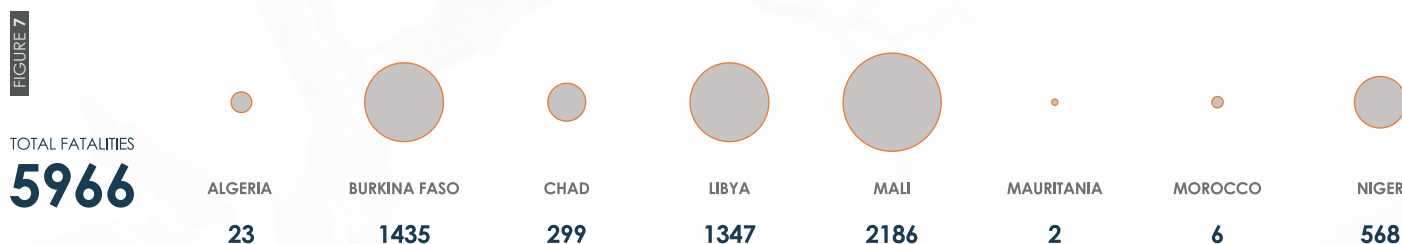
61   Brunero, Manuela . Stuart, Matthew. Guiryanan, Olivier. Hull, Danielle. Roberti, Alice. Perceptions of climate change and violent extremism. Torino. UNICRI. 2022.

62   UNOWAS. "Pastoralism and Security in West Africa and the Sahel". 2020:27.

63   Cepero, Oriol. Desmidt, Sophie. Detges, Adrien. Tondel, Fabien. Ackern, Pia. Foong, Adrien. Volkholz, Jan. "Climate Change, Development and Security in the Central Sahel".CIDOB. 2021: 42.

64   Ibid.

FATALITIES DUE TO VIOLENT CONFLICT OVER SELECTED YEARS IN NINE COUNTRIES. 2015-2020[65].

FIGURE 7

TOTAL FATALITIES	ALGERIA	BURKINA FASO	CHAD	LIBYA	MALI	MAURITANIA	MOROCCO	NIGER
5966	23	1435	299	1347	2186	2	6	568

65   UNICRI. "Many Hands On An Elephant: What Enhances Community Resilience To Radicalization into violent extremism" 2020:5. March 1, 2023. https://unicri.it/sites/default/files/2020-11/Many_hand.pdf

To elaborate on the linkage between climate change and violent conflict within Burkina Faso it is important to highlight the following points: Since there is heavy pressure on water resources, especially during dry season, in the Sahel region, and since pasture is important for livelihoods and cattle grazing, transhumance becomes the only option given the unpredictable fluctuations in rainfall[66]. But, as a result of transhumance, livestock of pastoralists destroy farmers' crops. And this is one of the many causes of conflict between farmers and herders in the area[67]. The absence of adequate government regulation regarding resource access, and lack of government presence in pastoral areas are critical factors for intercommunal conflict, which can create opportunities for insecurity[68].

According to GAIN index, which assesses countries' vulnerabilities to climate change and other global challenges, countries within the Sahel region are the most vulnerable and least resilient. As shown in Figure 6, climate change response or lack thereof, can lead to scenarios where the absence of adequate natural resources motivates violent conflict.

66   Cater, Charles. "Toward New Policies For The Climate Change & Violent Extremism Nexus In Africa". United Nations Development Program. Extremism InFocus. Issue Brief 1. 2021:26.

67   Climate Diplomacy. "Pastoralist and Farmer-Herder conflicts in the Sahel". June 5, 2023. https://climate-diplomacy.org/case-studies/pastoralist-and-farmer-herder-conflicts-sahel#:~:text=Conflicts%20between%20farmers%20and%20herders,cultivation)%20and%20access%20to%20water

68   Haan, Cees. Dubern, Etienne. Garancher, Bernard. Quintero, Catalina. Pastoralism Development in the Sahel: A Road To Stability?". World Bank Group. 2016:21-23. https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/586291468193771160/pdf/105197-WP-PUBLIC-PUB-DATE-5-16-2016.pdf

In the Lake Chad region, the livelihoods of 90% of the population are dependent on lake water and rainfall. These resources have supported millions of people living in the river basin area[69]. Two patterns of conflict were heightened due to the impact of climate change. First, the lake's diminishing resources caused a change in pastoral mobility patterns in Chad and increased the risk of conflict between herders and farmers due to migration, transhumance, and access to natural resources[70]. Second, the increased conflict over scarce resources resulted in proliferation of firearms and light weapons[71]. In addition to this, Chad has suffered terrorist attacks, farmer-herder conflicts, and ethnic unrest. These vulnerabilities have intersected with activities of terrorist groups such as Boko Haram and Daesh's West Africa Province[72]. As shown in [Figure 7], the death toll in Chad and other countries in the Sahel has been tremendous as a result of violent conflict.

After gaining a comprehensive understanding of the socio-economic dynamics of the climate context in the region of Chad, grassroot organizations have taken proactive measures to implement resilience programs to tackle extremist violence. As highlighted in the report titled "Many Hands On An Elephant", efforts have been made to launch programs that cater to small farming families to promote a dynamic and inclusive farming approach, especially targeting youth and women[73]. This highlights the importance of fostering good governance, implementing resilience programs, and promoting climate change adaptation in tackling the root causes of extremist violence. In one quantitative study, it was concluded that there isn't a direct link between climate change events — such as heavy rains or drought — and the number of violent events involving armed groups in central Sahel[74]. It has been established that the relationship between climate change and violence is indirect. For example, during bouts of heavy rain the number of violent incidents involving armed opposition groups (AOGs) goes up by 5%, and in cases of drought the number of violent incidents involving AOGs goes up by 7%[75]. However, the effect is almost 22% for both types of extreme events in places with bad infrastructure and low economic activity[76]. This suggests the link between climate change and violence rests heavily on a variety of factors, whether they are socioeconomic, such as poverty or agriculture production, or political factors, such as government policies[77]. Other factors include the structure of the population, the robustness of the social protection system, and the strength of resilience policies of the country[78]. In places where economic livelihoods depend a lot on natural resources, like farmland and freshwater, high rates of population growth and density can put a lot of pressure on natural resources that can be replenished.[79]

Accordingly, the lack of government regulation to access these resources could lead to conflict. Furthermore, the government needs to capitalize on patterns of population growth by implementing well-planned policies that allow for the development of human capital[80], and suitable employment opportunities especially amongst the youth[81]. The combination of increasing strain on natural resources and an increase in youth unemployment could potentially drive them towards joining armed groups to fulfill economic needs[82]. In the context of vulnerability to the effects of climate change, resilience also refers to the ability to protect one's community from danger or, at the very least, the capability to react swiftly to crises and recover from them, thereby reducing the risk of long-term damage and loss of life[83].

69   SIPRI, NUPI. "Climate, Peace, & Security Fact Sheet". The Climate-related Peace and Security Risks project. 2021:1. February 21, 2023. https://sipri.org/sites/default/files/NUPI_Fact_Sheet_Sahel_LR5.pdf

70   Ibid.

71   Frimpong, Osei. "Climate Change and Violent Extremism in the Lake Chad Basin: Key Issues and Way Forward" . Africa Program Publications, Wilson Center. 2020.

72   Ibid.

73   UNICRI. "Many Hands On An Elephant: What Enhances Community Resilience To Radicalization into violent extremism" 2020.. March 1, 2023. https://unicri.it/sites/default/files/2020-11/Many_hand.pdf

74   Cepero, Oriol. Desmidt, Sophie. Detges, Adrien. Tondel, Fabien. Ackern, Pia. Foong, Adrien. Volkholz, Jan. "Climate Change, Development and Security in the Central Sahel".CIDOB. 2021: 44.

75   Ibid

76   Ibid.

77   International Crises Group. "The Central Sahel: Scene of New Climate Wars?". Brussels. 2020:7.

78   Diaollo, Yoro. Tapsoba, Rene. "Climate Shocks and Domestic Conflicts in Africa". IMF working paper. No. 250. 2022:7. February 20, 2023. https://doi.org/10.5089/9798400227066.001

79   Clausen, A.W. Paden, Donald. "Population Growth & Economic & Social Development". The Journal of Economic Education. Vol 16. No. 13. 1985:169.

80   Diaollo, Yoro. Tapsoba, Rene. "Climate Shocks and Domestic Conflicts in Africa". IMF working paper. No. 250. 2022:7. February 20, 2023. https://doi.org/10.5089/9798400227066.001

81   UNICRI. "Many Hands On An Elephant: What Enhances Community Resilience To Radicalization into violent extremism" 2020:24. March 1, 2023. https://unicri.it/sites/default/files/2020-11/Many_hand.pdf

82   Sakor, Binto.Youth Bulges in the Sahel: A Demographic Threat?, PRIO Policy Brief, 1. Oslo: PRIO.2020:1.

83   Frankenberger, T., Mueller, M., Spangler, T., & Alexander, S. (2013). Community resilience: Conceptual framework and measurement. Rockville, MD, USA: Feed the Future Learning Agenda. 2013. March 15, 2023.

Since groups and families will not have the capacity to protect themselves from certain big risks, it is vital that governments be ready and able to protect their citizens in such cases. Governments that are more effective, responsive, and stable are better able and more willing to deal with climate-related emergencies[84].

As highlighted in Figure 9, community resilience seems to be at the lowest within the Sahel region. Central Sahel shows a high number of climate related disasters as shown Figure 10.

Comparing this to Figure 8, we notice how certain socioeconomic and political conditions associated with climate disasters overlap with conflict in the Sahel region.
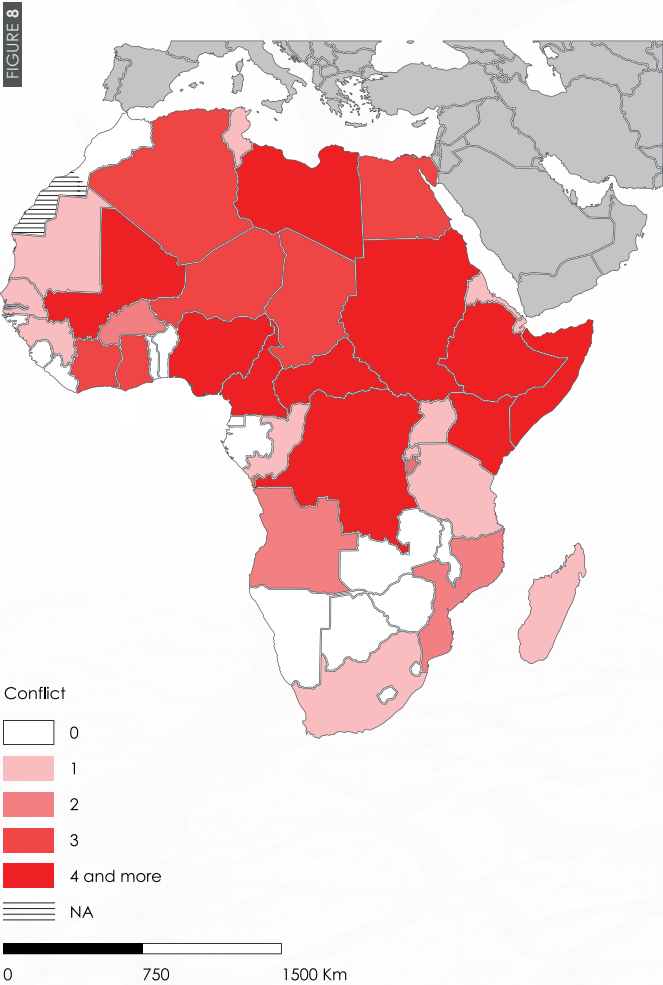
84   Krishnan, Nisha. Smith, Todd. Busby, Joshua. Climate security vulnerability in Africa mapping 3.0. Political Geography. Volume 43. 2014:51-67. February 10, 2023. Accessed at: http://sites.utexas.edu/busby/files/2020/02/PoliticalGeography.pdf

HOUSEHOLD AND COMMUNITY RESILIENCE[86].
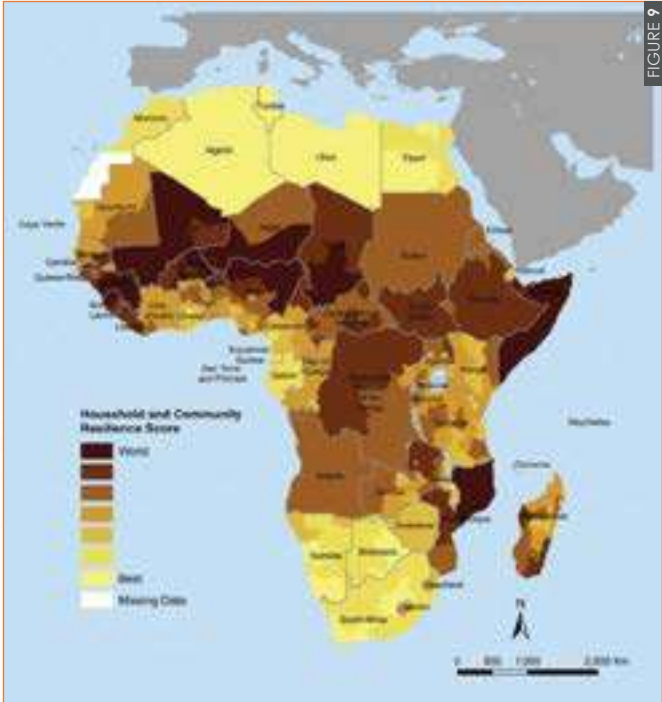
FIGURE 9

86   Krishnan, Nisha. Smith, Todd. Busby, Joshua. Climate security vulnerability in Africa mapping 3.0. Political Geography. Volume 43. 2014:58. February 10, 2023. Accessed at: http://sites.utexas.edu/busby/files/2020/02/PoliticalGeography.pdf

ANNUAL AVERAGE NUMBER OF CONFLICTS OVER THE PERIOD 2010 - 2018[85].

FIGURE 8

Conflict

- 0
- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4 and more
- NA

0   750   1500 Km

85   Diaollo, Yoro. Tapsoba, Rene. "Climate Shocks and Domestic Conflicts in Africa". IMF working paper. No. 250. 2022:7. February 20, 2023. https://doi.org/10.5089/9798400227066.001

NUMBER OF CLIMATE-RELATED DISASTERS FROM 1997 - 2011[87].

FIGURE 10

Number of Climate-Related Disasters
- High
- Low

87   Krishnan, Nisha. Smith, Todd. Busby, Joshua. Climate security vulnerability in Africa mapping 3.0. Political Geography. Volume 43. 2014:58. February 10, 2023. Accessed at: http://sites.utexas.edu/busby/files/2020/02/PoliticalGeography.pdf

People are vulnerable to the impacts of climate change for many reasons. These factors encompass their dependence on natural resources and ecosystem services, the susceptibility of these resources and services to climate change effects, and their capacity to adapt to these changes[88]. Individuals are more vulnerable to the effects of climate change if they depend more on natural resources that are sensitive to climate change and less on economic or social forms of capital[89]. Environmental changes do not exist in isolation. The capacity of humans to adapt to climate change hinges on numerous factors, including social cohesion within vulnerable communities, economic opportunities, and poverty levels[90].

B NATURAL RESOURCES AS A TOOL OF WAR

Natural renewable resources, such as water, have an important role in the livelihoods of communities and are a key factor of production, particularly in economies heavily reliant on agriculture. The scarcity of such resources is the main cause for communal anxiety, especially in regions where such resources are insufficient or mismanaged. Add to that the rapid demographic growth in resource-dependent societies, the increase of per capita consumption, and the unequal distribution of resources. These trends result in resource depletion or lack of accessibility and to grievances. A way to correlate the relationship between resources and extremist violence is the extent to which they act as the main source of income.

In instances where these extremist groups lack proper financing, they will refer to natural resources control to fill financing gaps[91]. They understand the economic potential of natural resources and strive to control resource producing areas. For extremist groups, "war is more profitable than peace", driving them to secure exclusive access to natural resources[92].

Several extremist groups have gained control over scarce resources to boost recruitment and support illicit networks, destroying natural capital and ecosystems[93]. For instance, in a state where climate change increased fragility amid the existing power vacuum, Daesh saw an opportunity to take control of resources to exert influence. The UNDP states when Daesh flooded into government installations and territories in Iraq, they also supplied water and electricity to the territories to strengthen control and gain legitimacy[94], and engaged in black market oil trade[95].

In a similar scenario, Boko Haram was able to mobilize new recruits who lacked economic opportunities, particularly around the Lake Chad region hit by droughts, desertification, land degradation, and food insecurity[96]. These are situations wherein extremist groups exploit power vacuums, lack of proper disaster response channels, and other challenges. These narratives have created an environment of instability, which has given rise to extremist organizations that deliver services that are not provided by the state[97]. Radical groups that resort to violence also use their control over resources as a military advantage. Daesh's seizure of Mosul dam is one such example[98]. Establishing climate change as the definitive cause or driver of extremism can be challenging given the complex nature of extremist violence. Hence, it is essential to recognize the context-specific variables through which climate change has an effect. These include colonial heritage, geography, ethnicities, availability of resources, strength of institutions, government policies, and corruption. As a SIPRI report argues, the status of regional insecurity is determined by an interplay of environmental, social, political, and economic forces that create the conditions for the rise of extremism.[99]

88   Barnett, Jon, Adger Neil. "Climate change, human security and violent conflict." Political Geography. Vol 26. No 6. 2007:639–55. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2007.03.003

89   Ibid.

90   Barnett, Jon, Adger Neil. "Climate change, human security and violent conflict." Political Geography. Vol 26. No6. 2007:639–55. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2007.03.003

91   Gane, Jean. David, Charles. "Natural Resources: A Source of Conflict?". International Journal, Vol. 62, No.1. 2006:12. March 5, 2023. https://www.jstor.org/stable/40204241: https://doi.org/10.2307/40204241

92   Ibid.

93   UNDP. "The climate security nexus and the prevention of violent extremism: Working at the intersection of major development challenges". UNDP Policy Brief.2020:4.

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TACKLING EXTREMISM WITH CLIMATE ACTION

Extremist violence is devastating economies in the Sahel, Horn of Africa, and Lake Chad Basin[100]. When climate change acts as a threat multiplier and shock accelerator, it exacerbates frustration, tension, and conflict in vulnerable environments[101]. Countries in conflict or post-conflict transitions, as well as those dealing with a rising youth population, bloated public sectors, fluctuating oil prices, weak governance, and the aftermath of a pandemic, are particularly vulnerable to effects of climate change[102]. As highlighted previously, presence of armed groups, battles over scarce resources, and radicalization are exacerbated as a result of the climate change crisis. Due to the multifaceted nature of such conflict-affected and conflict-driven areas, governments must address climate change as a matter of public policy.

It is important to highlight the role of climate change action in such areas as part of an integrated plan for preventing conflict and building peace. When focusing on issues of climate security, emphasis should be given to mitigation, adaptation, and providing integrated ways to deal with two of the most important problems of our time: Action on climate change, and peace[103]. Many vulnerable countries in Africa can benefit from climate action through adaptation, which can help disadvantaged and marginalized communities adjust to climate-induced or man-made shocks, preventing radicalization and extremist violence[104]. It is important to use climate security as a lens for post-conflict stabilization, especially in regional

contexts, because climate-related security risks often have externalities that require cross-border approaches[105].

A | CHALLENGES AND CONSIDERATIONS

The Country Climate and Development Report (CCDR) estimates climate change-related shocks could impoverish 13.5 million people in the Sahel by 2050 if immediate climate adaptation measures are not taken[106]. As emphasized in the Paris Agreement, it is crucial for both the public and private sectors at the national level to prioritize climate change adaptation. This concerted effort is essential for effectively addressing the consequences of climate change[107]. To discuss the appropriate climate adaptation policies for the Sahel, it is important to highlight challenges facing the region today. Africa suffers the most from climate change despite contributing only 3% of global carbon emissions[108]. According to the 2020 ND-GAIN Index, Sahel countries, excluding Mauritania, feature in the top 15% of states most vulnerable to climate change[109]. Plus, given the Sahel's dependency on climate sensitive economic sectors, the consequences of climate change and continued expansion of human settlements creates an ever-increasing risk[110].

Within the G5 countries in the Sahel (Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger), economic diversification remains very limited with more than half of total employment coming

100   Dia, Aliou."Addressing Radicalization and Violent Extremism Through Climate Action". 2017. April 12, 2023. https://climate-diplomacy.org/magazine/environment/addressing-radicalization-and-violent-extremism-through-climate-action

101   Ibid.

102   Alaaldin, Ranj. "Climate change may devastate the Middle East. Here's how governments should tackle it". 2022. April 20, 2023. https://www.brookings.edu/articles/climate-change-may-devastate-the-middle-east-heres-how-governments-should-tackle-it/

103   Wong, Catherine. Gold, Stephen. Rizk, Samuel. Flynn, Cassie. "Re-envisioning climate action to sustain peace and human security". UNDP. 2020. April 10, 2023. https://www.undp.org/blog/re-envisioning-climate-action-sustain-peace-and-human-security

104   Dia, Aliou."Addressing Radicalization and Violent Extremism Through Climate Action". 2017. April 12, 2023. https://climate-diplomacy.org/magazine/environment/addressing-radicalization-and-violent-extremism-through-climate-action

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106   World Bank. "Country, Climate, & Development Report: G5 Sahel Region". Washington. 2022.

107   United Nations Environment Programme. "Adaptation Gap Report 2020". Nairobi.2021.

108   Ruhweza, Alice."Climate adaptation: Castle in the sky or achievable reality?". United Nations. 2022. May 15, 2023. https://www.un.org/africarenewal/magazine/november-2022/climate-adaptation-castle-sky-or-achievable-reality

109   University of Notre Dame. "ND-GAIN: Notre Dame Global Adaptation Initiative 2020 Ranking". 2022. May 15, 2023. https://gain.nd.edu/our-work/country-index/

110   Brown, Oli., Hammill, Anne., & McLeman, Robert. "Climate Change as the 'New' Security Threat: Implications for Africa". Royal Institute of International Affairs. 2007:1149.

from agriculture – a sector that faces multiple threats of water stress, environmental degradation, and competition between farmers and pastoralists for scarce resources[111].The Climate Commission for the Sahel Region and the heads of states of the Sahel countries have adopted a climate investment plan for an estimated cost of $393 billion, for the years 2019-2030[112]. The 11 Sahelian countries included in the plan are Benin, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Chad, Ivory Coast, Djibouti, Equatorial Guinea, Mali, Mauritania, Niger and Sudan[113].

When discussing the Sahel, as shown below in Figure 11, an estimate needed for mitigation and adaptation based on the G5's Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) under the Paris Agreement, although these countries combined have contributed less than 1% of global GHG emissions[114]. The NDCs under the Paris Agreement and the CCDR estimate that the G5 Sahel nations need over $30 billion in total for climate action[115]. These statistics show how the lack of investment in mitigation and adaptation policies are one of the greatest challenges facing the region today.

111   World Bank. "Country, Climate, & Development Report: G5 Sahel Region". Washington. 2022.

112   UNFCCC. "Technical Assessment Of Climate Finance In The West African Community". 2020:20.

113   Ibid.

114   Brown, Oli., Hammill, Anne., & McLeman, Robert. "Climate Change as the 'New' Security Threat: Implications for Africa". Royal Institute of International Affairs. 2007:1149-1152.

115   World Bank. "Country, Climate, & Development Report: G5 Sahel Region". Washington. 2022.

ESTIMATES NEEDED FOR ADAPTATION AND MITIGATION BASED ON G5 NDCS[116]

Sahel Country	Est. Mitigation NDC Investment (US$ bn by 2030)	Est. Adaptation NDC Investment (US$ bn by 2030)	Total NDC Investment Est. (US$ bn by 2030)	Average annual NDC Investment as % of 2021 GDP	Average annual NDC Investment as % of 2021 total capex
Burkina Faso	1.34	2.79	4.12	2.2	31.6
Chad	6.70	5.00	11.70	12.2	181.4
Mali	4.34	8.00	12.34	7.4	110.7
Mauritania	34.26	10.63	44.88	54.2	704.2
Niger	3.17	6.74	9.91	7.7	61.1
Total	49.80	33.16	82.96	N.A	N.A

FIGURE 11

116   Ibid, p.10.

Current adaptation methods in the Sahel include income diversification policies, water harnessing, soil conservation, adjustment in agricultural practices, with more detailed adaptation actions taken by the countries in the Sahel shown in Figure 12. Nevertheless, the capacity of these communities to adapt to human-induced climate change is limited by numerous factors, including chronic underdevelopment, poverty, regional economies heavily reliant on the exploitation of natural resources, and corruption[117]. Despite rapid urban growth, a large percentage of Africa's population and livelihood are still closely tied to natural environmental conditions, and rural populations are particularly vulnerable to a combination of these factors[118].

117   Brown, Oli., Hammill, Anne., & McLeman, Robert. "Climate Change as the 'New' Security Threat: Implications for Africa". Royal Institute of International Affairs. 2007:1151.

118   Ibid.

Globally, Africa suffers most from climate change despite contributing only 3% of global carbon emissions.

THE FOUR CATEGORIES OF CLIMATE CHANGE ADAPTATION ACTIONS IN THE SAHEL[119]

TECHNICHALLY RELATED ADAPTATION OPTIONS	INDIGENOUS PROBLEM SOLVING ADAPTATION OPTIONS
Mixed farming	Migration
Climate monitoring	Income diversification
Soil conservation	Pasture management
Water harnessing	Labour management

ECONOMICALLY RELATED ADAPTATION OPTIONS	SOCIALLY RELATED ADAPTATION OPTIONS
Sale of cattle for grain	Investing in Education
Access to credit	Support from kin/groups
Remittances	Creating committees for natural resource managment

119   Epule, Terence., Chehbouni, A., & Dhiba, Driss. "Recent Climate Change Adaptation Strategies in the Sahel: A Critical Review".Intech Open. 2021:4.

In terms of economic progress, the G5 countries are near the bottom of the continent. The rapid population growth in certain regions is a contributing factor. The G5 population is expected to nearly double from its 2018 level of over 81 million to 2040's level of around 152 million as shown in Figure 12[120]. According to the World Bank, GDP per capita growth in the Sahel region averaged only 1.65% per year during 2010-19 due to very high population growth rates[121]. Population growth, climate fragility, violence and conflict, and displacement have caused a massive influx in urbanization to existing cities[122]. As highlighted by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), climate related events in the Sahel are interconnected with the root causes of conflicts, ultimately leading to migration[123]. Figure 13 shows the increase of displacement of people in the Sahel countries, which is one of the leading causes of urbanization. Current urbanization trends will create further difficulties in climate adaptation to already highly populated cities that lack climate resilient infrastructure[124].

120   Kwasi, Stellah. Cillers, Jackie. Welborn, Lily. Maiga, Ibrahim. "The G5 Sahel region: a Desert Flower?". Institute for Security Studies. May 20, 2023.https://issafrica.org/iss-today/the-g5-sahel-region-a-desert-flower

121   World Bank. "Country, Climate, & Development Report: G5 Sahel Region". Washington. 2022.

122   OECD. "Environmental Fragility In The Sahel". Paris. OECD Publishing. 2022:11.

123   OHCHR. "Human Rights Climate Change and Migration in the Sahel". United Nations. 2021:13.

124   IMF. (2020). "Regional Economic Outlook: Sub-Saharan Africa". 2020

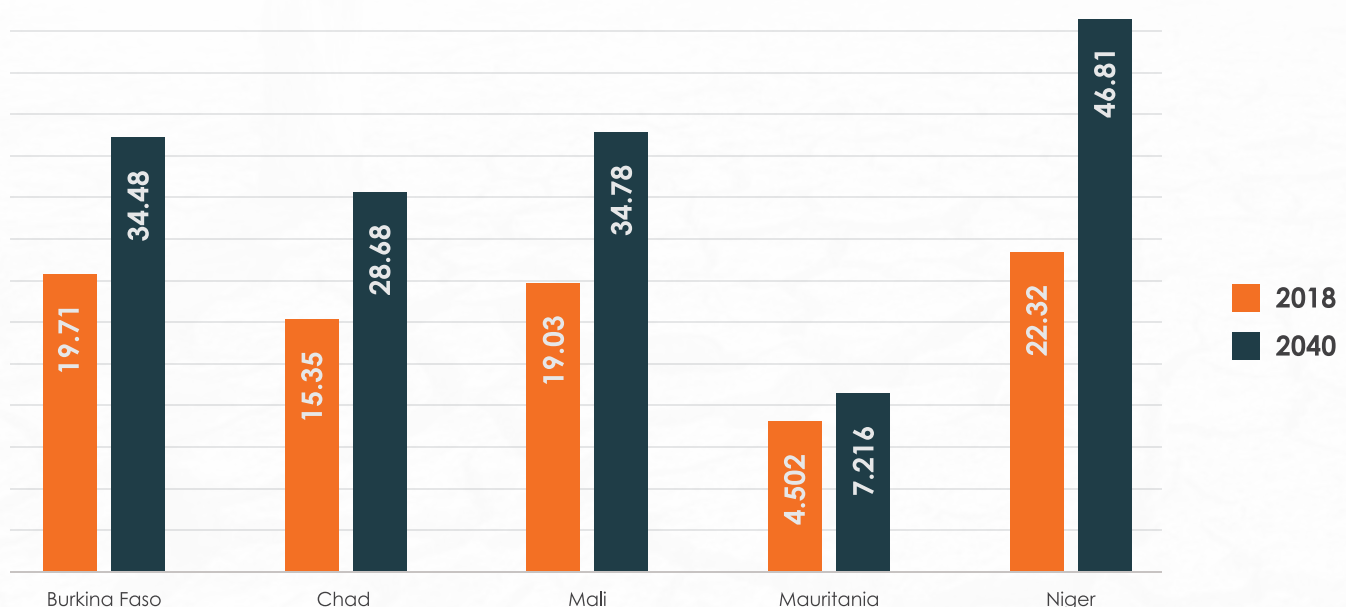## POPULATIONS OF THE G5 IN MILLIONS (KWASI, CILLERS, & WELBORN, 2020).

Burkina Faso: 19.71 (2018), 34.48 (2040); Chad: 15.35 (2018), 28.68 (2040); Mali: 19.03 (2018), 34.78 (2040); Mauritania: 4.502 (2018), 7.216 (2040); Niger: 22.32 (2018), 46.81 (2040)

- 2018
- 2040
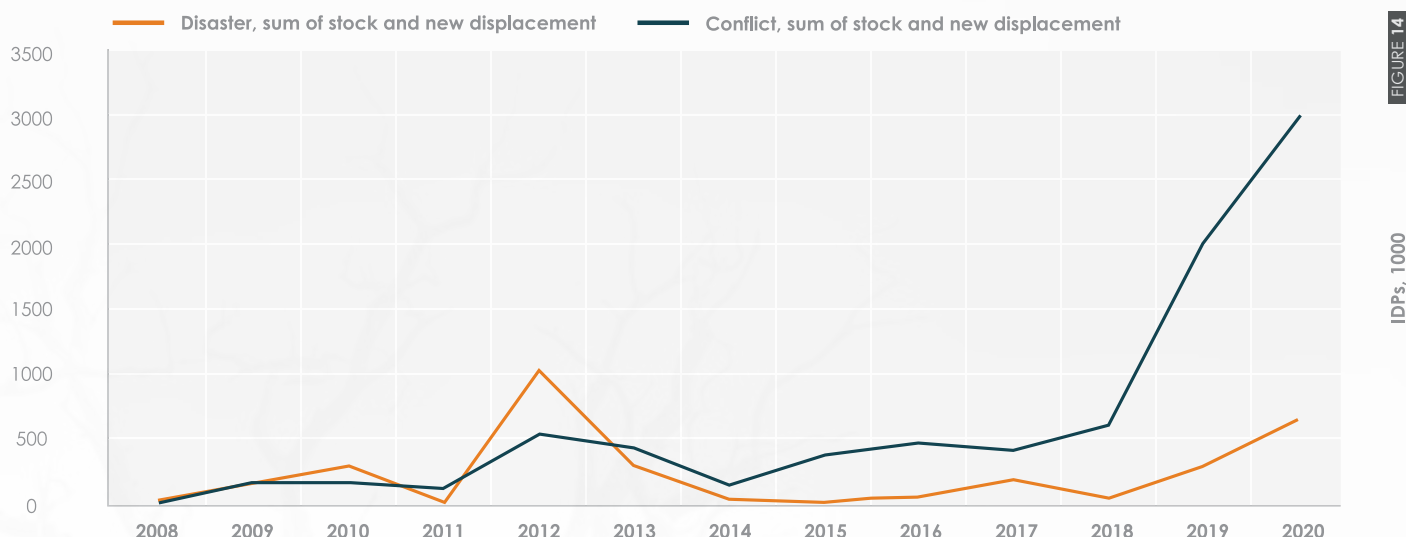
125   OECD. "Environmental Fragility In The Sahel". Paris. OECD Publishing. 2022:12.

B THE WAY FORWARD

For Africa to overcome climate and conflict challenges, governments must acknowledge the relationship between climate change and extremist violence, and integrate violence and conflict prevention measures into climate change adaptation plans and programs[126]. If climate change isn't recognized as a conflict and risk multiplier, it will not be on the forefront of national agendas[127]. The lack of confidence among countries may be alleviated if they have a shared vision for addressing climate-related security issues[128].

Climate change exaggerates social and economic difficulties, civil discontent, violent extremism, and terrorism, causing an upsurge that could inflict unspeakable suffering on the region[129]. Countries can advance climate change-related solutions by dedicating resources to research that explores the intricate connections between environmental fragility, various humanitarian aspects, economic factors, and peace-related dynamics.

To gain a comprehensive understanding of the complex dynamics between climate variability and the escalation of conflicts, it is crucial to adopt a qualitative and context-sensitive approach that enables a detailed analysis. The lack of context sensitivity when it comes to security challenges is a recipe for failure[130]. Local communities in the Sahel are made more vulnerable when environmental protection is administered from top down without their adequate participation and inclusion[131].

Official development assistance is often based on an insufficient understanding of the intricate ways in which environmental risks impact the economic, political, security, societal and human dimensions of fragility[132]. This has caused numerous blind spots in the design and implementation of policies and programs related to climate adaptation and mitigation.[133] For instance, the donor-funded Kandadji dam project in Niger gives rise to concerns regarding potential conflicts arising from increased displacement and tensions around land and water[134]. This example, amongst many others, emphasizes the importance of adequate data collection to better understand the issues at hand.

126   Dia, Aliou."Addressing Radicalization and Violent Extremism Through Climate Action". 2017. April 12, 2023. https://climate-diplomacy.org/magazine/environment/addressing-radicalization-and-violent-extremism-through-climate-action

127   Alaaldin, Ranj. "Climate change may devastate the Middle East. Here's how governments should tackle it". 2022. April 20, 2023.

128   Aminga, Vane. Krampe, Florian. "Climate-Related Security Risks and The African Union". Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI). Stockholm. 2020:9.

129   Alaaldin, Ranj. "Climate change may devastate the Middle East. Here's how governments should tackle it". 2022. April 20, 2023.

130   Raineri, Luca. (2020). "Sahel Climate conflicts? When Fighting Climate Change Fuels Terrorism".European Union Institute for Security Studies. 2020:7.

131   Ibid.

132   OECD. "Environmental Fragility In The Sahel". Paris. OECD Publishing. 2022:17.

133   Ibid.

134   DaoudaDiallo, Balkissa. "Niger's Kandadji Dam project: conflict concerns". Climate Diplomacy. 2021. May 30, 2023. https://climate-diplomacy.org/magazine/environment/nigers-kandadji-dam-project-conflict-concerns

The African Union presents a valuable opportunity to address and mitigate such issues by strengthening cooperation among various players and increasing institutional integration of data collection and analysis linked to climate-related security challenges[135]. The involvement of different national, regional, and international actors in understanding conflict sensitivities that accompany the conflict-environment nexus could be achieved through the participation of the local communities in the decision-making process[136].

Another way to ensure adaptability is to enhance support for a more sustainable urbanization process. Cities are struggling to meet the needs of their rapidly expanding populations, and this poses a number of problems. One is an increased social risk in urbanization because many people choose to move to unsuitable properties, putting themselves and businesses at risk from climate change and communal conflict over new land[137]. Considering the economic importance of cities, a way to adapt to such rapid urbanization is the investment in secondary cities with resilient infrastructure, capacity for urban management, and opportunities for micro-finance[138]. Governments should consider ideas for supporting urban growth in the long term by creating and investing in climate resilient cities[139].

Maladaptation is a pressing concern for the region. Therefore, it is crucial to increase efforts for climate resilient policies at the national level. Additionally, a combination of adaptation and mitigation actions can be strong tools for development, working in synergy to achieve broader objectives and enhance climate change resilience. This is something that can be accomplished through collaborative effort and shared understanding on the climate-conflict nexus.

135   Aminga, Vane. Krampe, Florian. "Climate-Related Security Risks and The African Union". Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI). Stockholm. 2020:7.

136   Ibid.

137   Goga, S., Debomy, S., & Baker, J. "Secondary cities and towns in the Sahel: Creating places of opportunity".World Bank. 2023. May 20, 2023. https://blogs.worldbank.org/sustainablecities/secondary-cities-and-towns-sahel-creating-places-opportunity

138   Ibid.

139   World Bank. "Country, Climate, & Development Report: G5 Sahel Region". Washington. 2022.

CONCLUSION

This research paper is meant to be a comprehensive examination of the interplay between climate change and the alarming surge of extremism in the Sahel. It highlights a frequently overlooked yet critical nexus — the relationship between the escalating ecological instability and the intensification of extremist activities in the region.

In an analysis that considered the rapid rise of extremism and the expanding footprint of terror organizations like Al Qaeda and Daesh, the research elucidates how these groups leverage climate-induced vulnerabilities to consolidate their power, fuel social discord, and propagate extremist narratives. This underlines the emergent reality that climate change has matured into a threat multiplier.

The research delves into the intricate pathways through which climate change, notably through devastating environmental events such as droughts, floods, and the creeping advance of desertification, has been fuelling socio-political instability across the Sahel. The consequential economic disruption and loss of livelihoods, accentuated by systemic weaknesses in governance and social structure, create a fertile ground for extremist groups. This climate-induced turmoil allows these groups to exploit the ensuing desperation, recruit disillusioned youth, and further entrench their divisive ideologies.

The complexity of the issues in the Sahel region calls for a reframing of our approach towards extremism. The conventional, heavily security-focused strategies have proven insufficient. Our study suggests that climate action, when strategically applied, can emerge as an effective counter-extremism tool. This line of thought is supported by a growing body of literature, pointing towards the need for a broader, more nuanced, and context-sensitive approach to tackling the increasing challenge of extremism.

Climate change mitigation efforts offer promising opportunities to empower local communities, stimulate economic growth, and thereby, weaken the appeal of extremist narratives.

However, the implementation of such an integrated approach presents an array of challenges and necessitates several considerations.

These range from the imperative of a comprehensive understanding of local contexts, including cultural nuances, political dynamics, and socio-economic structures, to the need for coordinated international cooperation and alignment of objectives. A significant aspect is also the inclusion of local communities in the decision-making processes, ensuring their perspectives are factored into the policies that directly affect their lives.

In this context, capacity building efforts must be prioritized, with an emphasis on developing the capabilities of local leaders, fostering community-led initiatives, and nurturing a sense of ownership among the people. Additionally, integrating gender perspectives and promoting the active participation of women in these processes can lead to more inclusive, effective, and sustainable outcomes.

The research underscores that bridging the gap between climate action and counter-extremism not only offers a pathway to mitigate the twin threats of climate change and extremism but also provides an avenue for sustainable development, peace, and stability in the Sahel. This integrated approach, as our study suggests, could redefine the narrative of the region, transitioning it from a symbol of despair and conflict to a beacon of resilience and sustainable development.

While the study sheds light on these interconnections and potential strategies, it also highlights the need for further research to refine our understanding of this complex nexus. Future studies and policy deliberations must continue to explore this integrated approach, positioning the interplay between climate change and extremism at the core of the solutions for the Sahel. As we forge ahead, the insights from this research serve as a crucial stepping stone in our collective endeavor to envision and shape a future for the Sahel region that is resilient, inclusive, and peaceful.