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From Crisis to Conflict: Climate Change and Violent Extremism in the Sahel

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01

Foreword

The central Sahel region is a stark testament to the devastating effects of climate change. The region is now in a sustained emergency. The consequences of inaction here will ripple across continents, underscoring the need for immediate, practical solutions. Across Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, we are witnessing climate change unfold with alarming intensity. The Sahel's temperature is rising at 1.5 times the global average, as extreme weather events multiply and become more severe. Long-term shifts in temperature and rainfall patterns are destabilising entire communities – disrupting traditional ways of life, eroding livelihoods and threatening food security.

The impact of these shifts is transformative. Violent extremist groups, including factions associated with ISIS and al-Qaeda, are embedding themselves in societies already grappling with economic and environmental hardships. These groups exploit resource scarcity – especially around water and land – to recruit those who have been pushed to the edge, exacerbating governance voids and fragmenting the region. Mali and Burkina Faso now rank as the world's first and third most terrorism-affected countries, underscoring the severity of the situation for stability across the African continent and beyond.

In light of this, my Institute published *[A Path to Security: Renewing Relationships Within and Beyond the Sahel](#)* earlier this year, advocating for a coordinated and pragmatic international response through a Sahel Compact. This Compact calls for a unified framework, integrating climate adaptation with security and development, grounded in partnership with West African nations and their regional bodies. It addresses immediate threats while building long-term resilience by aligning with local ambitions, fostering self-sufficiency and enhancing community security.

This report provides an analysis of the overlooked intersection between escalating climate-induced scarcity and rising conflict in the central Sahel. Our findings reinforce our initial call for the international community's

renewed engagement – emphasising the critical steps needed to operationalise the Sahel Compact with climate resilience as a strategic priority for stability throughout the region.

We stand at a critical juncture. Niger’s population, the fastest growing in Africa, is set to double by 2050. Combined with extreme vulnerability to climate change, this demographic pressure will only intensify competition over dwindling resources, providing more inroads for extremist groups. Without decisive international engagement, the central Sahel’s instability will undoubtedly reverberate beyond its borders, drawing more into cycles of migration and insecurity.

The cost of inaction is too great, and we can absolutely prevent catastrophic long-term humanitarian and security impacts. The vehicle to act exists in a renewed Sahel Compact which, with its clear and actionable steps, provides a collective action on a shared challenge.

Tony Blair Executive Chairman

02

Executive Summary

With temperatures rising 1.5 times faster than the global average, the central Sahel faces an escalating crisis in which climate fragility is increasingly fuelling instability. In 2023, the region accounted for nearly 47 per cent of global deaths from terrorism, while in 2024 Mali and Burkina Faso rank first and third globally for terrorist activity.¹ This stark reality underscores how violent-extremist groups like Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) and Islamic State Sahel Province (IS-Sahel) have strengthened their foothold by capitalising on both climate-change-driven resource scarcity and the state's weakened capacity for managing environmental and security threats.

In April 2024, TBI's paper [*A Path to Security: Renewing Relationships Within and Beyond the Sahel*](#) set out the history of this conflict. We charted the numerous regional and international efforts to stem the conflict – through military intervention, mediation and capacity building – and explained why, despite such interventions, the central Sahel is now the epicentre of violent extremism and extremism-related deaths worldwide. Building on that analysis, this paper investigates the relationship between climate-induced scarcity and the expansion of violent extremism across the central Sahel.

The impacts of climate change are already exacerbating hostility and conflict. Rising temperatures, irregular rainfall and shifting seasonal patterns are straining the central Sahel's agricultural productivity, deepening vulnerabilities among communities dependent on farming and herding. As essential resources like water and arable land grow scarce, communities are becoming increasingly frustrated by the state's inability to address their needs. Migration patterns are shifting as communities are forced to move, which escalates competition for resources and further solidifies anti-state sentiment. The destabilisation of traditional livelihoods is opening pathways for extremist groups to recruit individuals seeking stability and support. Ethnic and religious divisions are becoming more pronounced as climate pressures increase competition over resources, fuelling conflict and instability.

TBI's analysis of data from a five-year period shows that the impacts of

violent-extremist-induced conflict and climate change have progressively become more intertwined, marking a new phase in the Sahel crisis's expansion and management. Our findings show that violent extremists are exploiting climate fragility to further their aims – from scaling their recruitment and statecraft efforts, to advancing their offensives and gaining ground – all in support of the wider goal to establish an Islamic state in the central Sahel.

Our analysis has found that:

- JNIM and IS-Sahel are now responsible for more than 60 per cent of all incidents of insecurity in the central Sahel, launching between 35 and 40 attacks per week, and expanding southwards territorially.
- Violent extremists are deliberately destroying water infrastructure to control water accessibility. We found a 40 per cent increase in the deliberate destruction of water infrastructure between 2019 and 2024.
- Violent extremists are instituting “conflict-resolution” services for Sahelians, as land disputes worsen from climate change, while also providing food and basic resources to win hearts and minds. They are also deliberately eroding state services to induce further resource scarcity.
- Violent extremists steal cattle to sustain operations, but also recover assets for locals to strengthen influence and exploit anti-state narratives. We found 593 incidents where either JNIM or IS-Sahel were involved in livestock theft.
- Violent extremists are recruiting at scale, exploiting the intersection of youth vulnerability, negative climate impacts and the precarious employment afforded by the informal economy.
- Violent extremists are aligning with, and recruiting along, ethnoreligious lines, particularly from resource-scarce communities.

Our findings also point to the risks that lie ahead for the Sahel – in particular, the risk of isolationism, and both regional and global disunity impeding West Africa's capacity to confront the increasingly interwoven issues of climate insecurity, conflict and violent extremism. Regionally, the formation of the Alliance of Sahel States (ASS) and the imminent withdrawal of Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso from the Economic Community of West African States

(ECOWAS) signal a shift towards isolationism, weakening collective security programmes, including those combatting violent extremism, and efforts to strengthen regional safety nets as resource scarcity worsens. Regional disunity may push ECOWAS states to prioritise their national interests, further undermining collective action on climate and security, and creating space for extremist growth. A lack of cohesive policies limits ECOWAS and the African Union's (AU) oversight of migration and resource issues, worsening displacement and conflict.

As regional politics shift, so do geopolitical alliances: while non-Western states are losing influence with these three states, nations including Russia and Iran are increasing theirs, indicating a strong likelihood that polarisation between the central Sahel and the rest of ECOWAS will continue to grow. ASS's isolationism risks fostering anti-Western sentiment and regional alignment with non-Western powers, impacting the next generation's outlook and shaping the Sahel's international engagement for years to come.

The disparate strategic agendas of the world's most powerful nations are making unified climate-security interventions increasingly difficult to initiate, let alone successfully sustain. If regional disunity becomes more deeply entrenched and avenues for the central Sahel to pursue meaningful political engagement with the rest of the world narrow, the dual threats of violent extremism and climate change risk permanently damaging not just Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, but their neighbours in North and West Africa, Europe and regions further afield. The central Sahel's longer-term resilience against climate-security challenges, future and present, will also be critically undermined.

A [Sahel Compact](#) is required to bring the international community together to address shared challenges in the region, mitigate the risks of regional fracturing and work to address the interlinked crises of climate change and conflict. By nurturing multilateral partnerships, this Compact could revitalise regional and international cooperation, aligning policy frameworks across the ASS, ECOWAS and other global stakeholders. It should prioritise climate resilience and security collaboration, creating a unified platform to address complex challenges, while bridging the divisions that currently inhibit

effective action and perpetuate cycles of scarcity and insecurity. To this end, the Compact should pursue four strategic priorities:

1. Regional Climate–Security and Coordinated Counter–Terrorism Initiatives

The Compact should prioritise climate-sensitive security initiatives to address farmer–herder conflicts and the resource scarcity that violent extremists exploit, focusing on regions where state authority has collapsed and extremist groups are filling the void. A Sahel-wide Climate–Security Coordination Hub should be established to work with governments, civil society and international donors to monitor climate-related risks and address vulnerabilities. Regionally specific Climate–Security Action Plans focused on sustainable resource management and conservation of strategic sites should be created, with the hub serving as a knowledge-sharing platform.

2. Cross–Border Migration and Mobility Frameworks

The breakdown in the relationship between ECOWAS and the ASS risks undermining collective responses to climate-induced migration. The Compact should work to harmonise migration policies to reduce inter-state tension and provide economic stability to communities reliant on seasonal movement, minimising resource-related conflicts that fuel extremist control in rural areas. It should bolster frameworks for managing and coordinating cross-border migration to standardise safe and regulated movement, particularly for pastoralist and displaced populations.

3. Climate–Resilient Economic Growth

The Compact should leverage partnerships to promote climate-resilient livelihoods, alleviating the competition over resources that fuels local grievances and enables extremist recruitment. It should deploy community-

driven resilience strategies focused on adaptive measures to counter environmental degradation and stabilise resource-dependent economies. It should also create a platform to facilitate international partnerships to co-finance large-scale renewable-energy projects and leverage private-public partnerships for sustainable agriculture programmes.

4. International Financing

The Compact should mobilise private-sector and international financing to significantly increase investments in renewable energy and climate-adaptive infrastructure, providing much-needed stability to populations vulnerable to extremist influence. It should create a Climate-Security Fund to build climate resilience and a Diversified Development Fund to target migration, security, economic development and governance.

03

Introduction

The central Sahel is no stranger to hardship, having long experienced some of the highest levels of poverty, insecurity and stalled development worldwide. However, this semi-arid region – positioned between the Sahara to the north and coastal West Africa to the south, and made up of Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger – is now facing compounding threats on an unprecedented level.

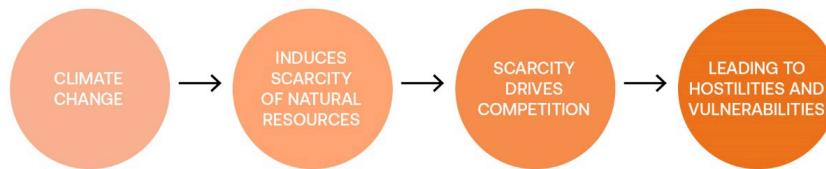
Climate change is altering the socioeconomic backdrop in the central Sahel, fostering a rise in public hostility towards the state. With temperatures in the Sahel predicted to rise five times faster than the global average,² climate change is intensifying pressures on natural resources and destabilising traditional livelihoods across the region. This rapid environmental shift is transforming the central Sahel's landscape, creating a backdrop of resource scarcity and economic strain that is fuelling hostility towards the state, and creating drivers of conflict. As agricultural productivity declines, communities reliant on farming and herding struggle to sustain themselves, facing worsening scarcities of water and arable land. The state's limited capacity to address these growing needs is cultivating resentment, pushing many towards alternative sources of support, including violent-extremist groups that are systematically exploiting the shortcomings of state services and seeking to fill the gaps the state leaves open.

Greater volatility in migration patterns among herders – again driven by climate change's impacts – is disrupting traditional routes and intensifying competition over resources with farming communities, further escalating tensions. Ethnic and religious divides are also deepening as populations are forced into closer, often conflict-ridden proximity in an effort to secure the resources key to their survival. Meanwhile, the informal economy – which sustains much of the Sahelian population, especially young people – faces severe impacts from climate pressures, diminishing employment and stability. Facing few options, young people are increasingly drawn into criminal networks or armed groups that offer income and purpose in a time of profound economic hardship.

As climate-induced scarcity worsens, the central Sahel's social fabric is being reshaped. Anti-state sentiment is hardening, and this could widen pathways to violent extremism, perpetuating instability across the region.

FIGURE 1

The causal relationship between climate change, resource scarcity and conflict

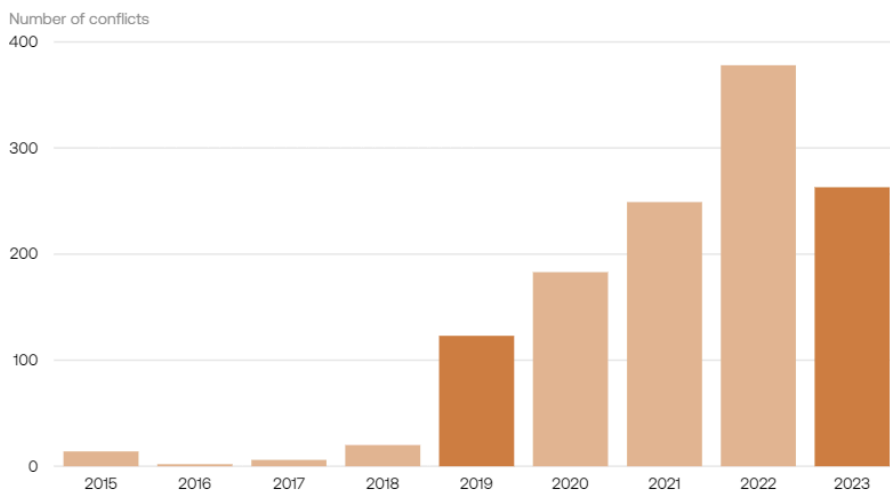


Source: TBI

In 2017, violent-extremist activities expanded into Burkina Faso from Mali, instigating conflict in a tri-state area known as Liptako-Gourma and cementing the central Sahel as one of the largest zones of conflict in the world. That year marked a turning point, and both the violent offensives and statecraft initiatives of these extremist groups have since become more embedded in the region. However, these actors are now also weaponising the effects of climate degradation – including desertification and drought – and its resulting socioeconomic disruptions to strengthen their influence, undermine state authority and expand their control.

FIGURE 2

Conflict linked to climate-induced scarcity rose by more than 114 per cent between 2019 and 2023



Source: ACLED data; TBI analysis

Two actors in particular are responsible for this: al-Qaeda (AQ) affiliate Jama-at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM), and Islamic State (IS) affiliate IS-Sahel Province (IS-Sahel). These groups can justifiably be categorised as violent Islamist extremists, which distort Islamic scripture and ideology to justify the use of violence and state delegitimisation, helping them to actively pursue the establishment of an Islamic state across the Sahel. As they become more sophisticated, benefitting from direct funding from both AQ and IS, and exploiting ever-growing networks of illicit trafficking routes on the African continent, both JNIM and IS-Sahel are strategically exploiting climate fragility, expanding their territory and increasingly filling governance gaps to scale their recruitment of vulnerable Sahelian populations.

These groups are re-engineering their violent offensives, targeting state infrastructure such as water holes in order to derail support services for

Sahelians. Points for water collection are ever more critical as climate change is causing natural water deposits to recede amid progressively more erratic rainfall patterns. This leads to resource-scarce populations becoming desperate for substitute services, which can then be fulfilled by the violent-extremist perpetrators actively positioning their operations. Today, the statecraft initiatives of JNIM and IS-Sahel in the region include the provision of food and water, welfare support and mechanisms for delivering “dispute resolution” – all instituted to allow the groups to wield greater influence over vulnerable populations that are losing sustained access to basic resources.

As the negative impacts of climate change and climate-induced scarcity have become more acute in the central Sahel, violent-extremist groups have increased their capacity to influence marginalised, resource-scarce communities, legitimising their own bids to establish an Islamic state in the region.

04

Climate Change's Impacts Are Fuelling Hostility and Conflict

The Sahel has long been exposed to harsh weather conditions, but climate change is causing these to occur with greater unpredictability, frequency and intensity. As global warming advances, temperatures in the Sahel are expected to rise approximately 1.5 times faster than the global average. The UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change projects that, by the middle of this century, average temperatures in the Sahel will likely surpass 35 degrees Celsius, intensifying the region's vulnerability to heat stress and environmental challenges.

Levels of informal employment in the central Sahel are among the highest in the world. In Burkina Faso, for example, those employed in the informal economy make up more than 95 per cent of the working population. The livelihoods of the central Sahel's agriculture-reliant populations, who are often part of this informal workforce, are especially at risk from the impacts of climate-change-induced scarcity. Natural-resource scarcity driven by climate change also disrupts transhumance routes and drives shifting migration patterns of herders escaping droughts, floods, extreme heat and desertification. These members of society, who are receiving limited or no government support in the form of welfare or subsidies, are feeling the impacts of climate change most acutely.

Climate change has become a key aggravator of living situations that are already challenging. As water, arable land and grazing areas grow more scarce, existing societal ties are becoming strained, while competition between ethnic groups and clans over resources is intensifying. This worsening scarcity and instability, compounded by inadequate policy and political responses, is increasingly fuelling anti-state sentiment in the central Sahel, and creating opportunities for alternative governance structures and informal networks to gain influence in affected communities.

These factors are weakening the social contract in the central Sahel and creating conditions conducive to conflict and extremist exploitation.

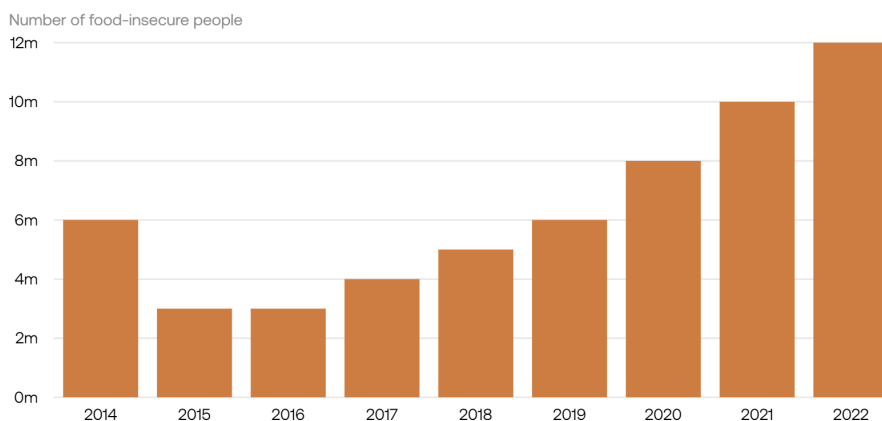
Climate Change Is Increasing Pressure on Agriculture and Fuelling Hostility Towards the State

Climate change is placing mounting pressure on agriculture, the central Sahel's largest economic sector, setting the stage for heightened tensions and deepening anti-government sentiment. Rising temperatures and extended heatwaves are undermining the sector; 78 per cent of the workforce (both farmers and herders) depends on arable land that is fast degrading.³

In Niger, for example, between 100,000 and 120,000 hectares of arable land are being lost annually to soil erosion.⁴ Likewise, in Burkina Faso declining crop yields are causing around 110 deaths per 10,000 children under the age of five, with 72 per cent of this impact attributable to adverse climate conditions in the growing season.⁵ Yields of sorghum, a staple crop, are expected to decline by as much as 5 per cent with a global temperature rise of 2 degrees.

FIGURE 3

The number of food-insecure people more than doubled from 2018 to 2022



Source: Alliance Sahel

Climate change is also affecting water availability and soil conditions across the region. By 2050, the Klela basin – a critical groundwater source in southern Mali – could see groundwater-recharge rates drop by as much as 49 per cent against a 2006 baseline.⁶ The increasing scarcity of essential resources like water and grazing land poses a growing problem for central Sahelian communities, particularly farmer and herder groups. Many are forced to sell livestock for less than market rates or abandon them entirely when herd maintenance becomes unsustainable.

As livelihoods are becoming more precarious in the central Sahel, frustration towards the state's perceived inability to address these environmental and economic hardships are mounting. In Mali, for example, communities experiencing crop failure and water shortages have demonstrated rising hostility towards state authorities, which they see as unresponsive to their urgent needs.

This rising disillusionment with government across the central Sahel not only stirs grievances but is also heightening the potential for protests as Sahelian populations shift towards alternative support networks promising more direct solutions. Similarly, as climate change continues to deplete the resources required for daily sustenance, including those needed for farming, the pathways that lead to anti-state sentiment are widening and multiplying. Eventually, these pathways evolve into pull factors for violent extremists to weaponise in recruitment campaigns targeting communities that feel marginalised or socioeconomically deprived.

Climate Change Is Creating Volatile Migration Patterns and Exacerbating Tensions

Hotter climatic conditions, irregular rainfall and shifting seasonal patterns in the central Sahel are disproportionately affecting herders, farmers and fishers, who rely on renewable natural resources for their subsistence and income. Pastoralists, alongside small-scale farming and fishing communities, continue to be most affected, but the overall impacts on livelihoods are far-reaching. As local ecosystems and economies shift, many communities are forced to move, leading to widespread displacement and, again, deepening

the hostility these populations harbour towards the state leadership they once relied on for stability and support. Inter-community tensions over resources are also worsening.

The UN Refugee Agency has reported that there are now 2.9 million internally displaced people (IDPs), and 592,000 refugees and asylum seekers in the central Sahel.⁷ Traditional seasonal migration paths used by herders to move livestock between grazing areas are becoming unsustainable because of reduced water availability and shrinking arable land. Over the past decade, for example, transhumance patterns in Mali have been shifting southwards as herders seek out new routes – the direction of this shift motivated both by richer resources and increased safety away from the expanding conflict in the north. However, in this shift southwards, herders are more often coming into contact with farmer communities.

Our analysis finds that over the past five years, there have been 450 incidents of conflict over resources between sedentary farmer and herder communities in the central Sahel. These clashes, largely due to herder communities encroaching on farmers' lands, are becoming more deadly as the competition for resources heats up; resulting fatalities have doubled in the same period.⁸

Pre-existing tensions between ethnic and ethnoreligious groups, traditionally over resources and fertile land, are also becoming more profound. While many marginalised pastoralists belong to the Fulani and the Tuareg ethnic groups, and are traditionally Muslim, farmers are often Christian, and ethnically Dogon or Mossi. Our analysis finds that increased violent activity between Fulani people and other ethnic groups in the region, including both the wider Dogon ethnic group and the Dogon ethnic militia Dan Na Ambassagou, is due not only to ethnoreligious fault lines, but also to the way in which climate change is forcing these actors to compete for fertile land and dominance over other resources.

Inflamed by climate change, the combination of these drivers – disrupted migratory patterns causing growing tension between farmers and herders, community-wide feelings of abandonment by government, and the competition for scarce resources that inflames ethnic and ethnoreligious

fault lines – will further escalate conflicts and deepen instability in the region.

Climate Change Is Destabilising the Informal Economy and Deepening Push Factors

Climate change is profoundly impacting the central Sahel’s informal economy, which employs a large portion of the population, particularly young people, in agriculture, livestock herding and small-scale trading. These sectors are highly vulnerable to the environmental stressors influencing the region, with rising temperatures, erratic rainfall and resource scarcity drastically reducing productivity. According to one estimate, gross domestic product (GDP) per capita as an average across Africa was 13.6 per cent lower than it would have been had climate change not occurred, in particular impacting agriculture, between 1991 and 2010.⁹ For the central Sahel, it is estimated to have lowered GDP by more than 20 per cent.¹⁰ This economic strain particularly harms informal sectors, which are typically excluded from official economic metrics, but are crucial for local livelihoods.

FIGURE 4

Change in GDP per capita due to observed climate change (1991–2010)



Source: IPCC Sixth Assessment Report, Chapter 9

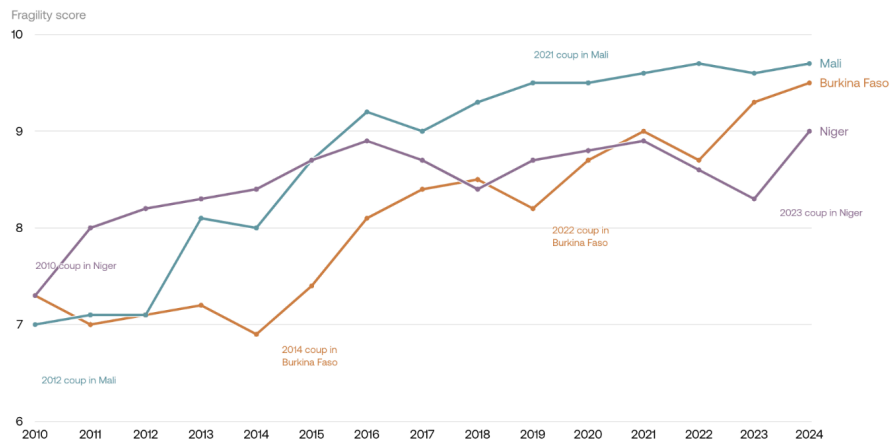
For young people, who make up a substantial proportion of the central Sahel's population (approximately 50 per cent of the population of Niger is less than 15 years old, with the figure for Mali at 48 per cent and Burkina Faso at 44 per cent), the already limited safety nets – such as welfare or subsidies – available to the informal workforce are further hindered in their effectiveness by the impacts of climate change. With limited access to formal employment or government support, many young people find themselves with few options but to engage in illicit activities or join armed groups, which offer financial incentives and a semblance of stability.

In the central Sahel, organised crime significantly impacts security and development. According to the Global Organized Crime Index's classification, "criminality" is alarmingly high: Mali ranks 15th in Africa and Niger ranks 18th; Burkina Faso ranks 16th – up five places from last year, marking the most severe deterioration in the region.¹¹ Particularly in areas where farmland and water are contested, resource scarcity – itself exacerbated by climate change – fuels tensions, creating fertile ground for criminal networks to recruit young people who feel abandoned by the state and see no other viable future.

Since 2017, when armed groups began to proliferate across the Liptako-Gourma region, the tri-state border area encompassing parts of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, existing criminal networks and trafficking routes have increasingly been co-opted by violent-extremist actors. Large numbers of young people have been recruited into these operations. Ultimately, without interventions to stabilise the informal economy and provide sustainable livelihood options, climate impacts are likely to act as a push factor towards criminal pathways for young, informal workers.

FIGURE 5

Worsening of fragility in Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso since 2010



Note: Based on 12 indicators of the risks and vulnerabilities faced by nations. Source: Fragile States Index

05

Increasing Scarcity: The Gamechanger for Violent Extremism

Climate change is worsening living conditions and weakening safety nets across the central Sahel. As previously established, the negative impacts of climate change are also stoking anti-state sentiment and the pursuit of alternative governance structures, as well as forging pathways to criminality and armed groups.

In the central Sahel, violent extremists are ever-more able to exploit marginalised communities and those disillusioned with their governments. Resource-scarce communities, struggling with the negative impacts of climate change as they attempt to cultivate arable land and maintain access to water and grazing resources, are particularly vulnerable to the actions of violent-extremist groups, which can be described as the single largest threat to peace, security and development in the central Sahel.

Conflict in the Central Sahel Is Being Steered by Violent Extremists

Our analysis finds terrorist groups that embrace violent Islamist ideologies are now responsible for nearly two-thirds of all incidents of insecurity in the central Sahel. The first and most active of these groups is JNIM, an AQ coalition formed in 2017 following the merger of prominent violent Islamist factions including Ansar Dine, Macina Liberation Front, al-Mourabitoun and al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, or AQIM. The second is IS-Sahel, IS's most established and successful affiliate faction in sub-Saharan Africa.

Both groups distort the tenets of Islam to justify the use of violence in order to erode the state, undermine democratic modes of governance, and win over the hearts and minds of populations – all in a bid to establish an Islamic state across the Sahel. While affiliated with, and often directed by, the

international violent-extremist franchises of AQ and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), both JNIM and IS-Sahel are inherently Sahelian. Their leadership has a deep knowledge of local languages and ethnic differences, and are well attuned to the various socioeconomic grievances held by communities.

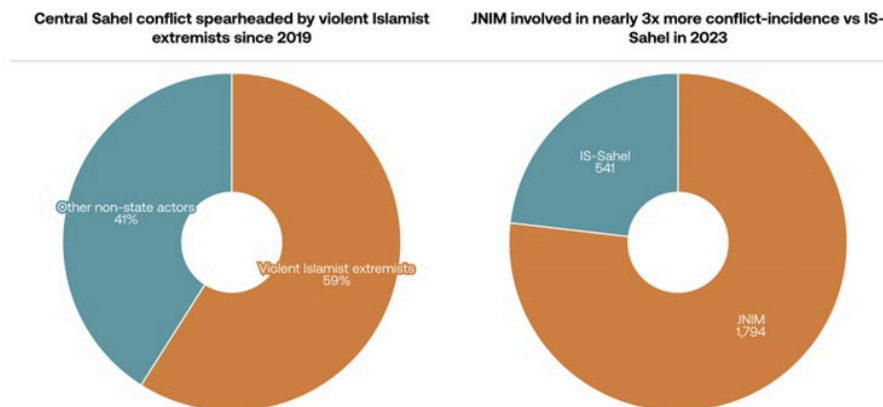
As violent extremism takes root, central Sahelian communities – particularly those affected by resource scarcity – are the first to suffer.

Violent Extremism Is Becoming More Sophisticated

Between them, JNIM and IS-Sahel launch an average of between 35 and 40 attacks per week, with JNIM now increasing its offensives at an average of 15 per cent year on year. Both groups are now among the most violent and active extremist groups in the world.¹²

FIGURE 6

Conflict in the central Sahel is predominately caused by violent extremists



Source: ACLED data; TBI analysis

While these actors predominantly carry out offensives in the tri-state Liptako-Gourma area – highlighting the transnational nature of this threat – spillover beyond this region is becoming more common. The risk of the central Sahel’s conflict taking root in the coastal states of Benin and Togo is now high.

With attacks increasing at an average rate of 20 per cent year on year, spillover beyond the region is becoming more common and the risk of the central Sahel’s conflict taking root in the coastal states of Benin and Togo is now high.

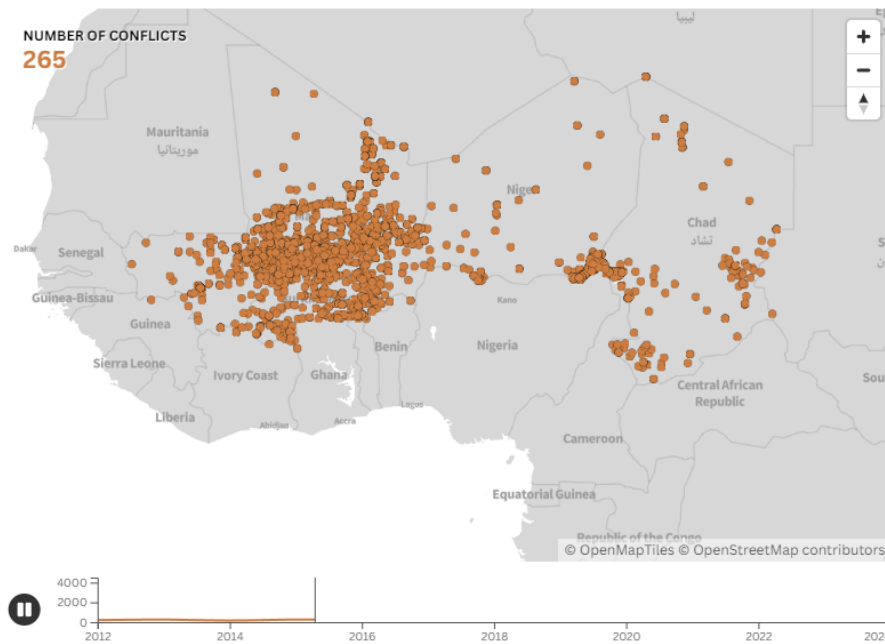
According to TBI’s analysis, there was a three-fold increase in the use of improvised explosive devices (IEDs) between January 2019 and October 2024, together with a notable rise in violent attacks against privately owned and state-backed infrastructure and security positions. The heightened sophistication of these offensives and the way in which they target the state demonstrates how violent extremists’ capacities are now advancing beyond the guerilla-style warfare witnessed until 2021.

Violent Extremism Is Spreading Across the Central Sahel

Having matured during the pandemic and in the immediate post-pandemic years, the operations of the violent-extremist groups affiliated to AQ and IS operating in the Sahel are now in an expansionist phase. In Mali, the war is spreading and moving southwards, closer to the capital, Bamako. Regions such as Burkina Faso’s Est and Niger’s Tillabéry are recording surges in conflict activity.

FIGURE 7

Expansion of conflict in the central Sahel (2012 to 2024)



Source: ACLED data; TBI analysis

Additionally, because these factions are expanding within and beyond the central Sahel, avenues for extremist recruitment are widening, as is the ability for these factions to wield influence over new populations through de facto statecraft initiatives.

Violent Extremists Are Weaponising Climate Change and Resource Scarcity

With every passing year, JNIM and IS-Sahel are becoming increasingly sophisticated, leading to greater territorial expansion and widening their avenues of recruitment from populations who feel marginalised by the state

and their current political leadership.

FIGURE 8

Climate-induced scarcity is driving extremist expansion and entrenchment



Source: TBI

With climate stress an exacerbator of grievances in the central Sahel, negative climate impacts are becoming hugely beneficial for JNIM and IS-Sahel in their pursuit to undermine the state, radicalise populations and advance their bids to establish an Islamic state across the Sahel.

Against a backdrop of growing civilian disillusionment and the negative socioeconomic impacts of climate change, TBI's research finds that violent-extremist groups in the central Sahel are reengineering their violent offensives and implementing premeditated statecraft initiatives in three key ways, all in a bid to increase their foothold in the region.

1. DELIBERATE EROSION OF STATE SERVICES AND INFRASTRUCTURE

Violent-extremist groups are engaging in a systematic campaign to destroy the services and resource-based infrastructure put in place by the state to serve Sahelians. Features of this include, but are not limited to, infrastructure

destruction, violent assaults, intimidation and targeted assassinations. Such tactics are heightened in areas prone to climate-induced scarcity, where communities are more dependent on state services and the reliable provision of basic resources. Consequently, such violence can force communities to rely on non-state governance and statecraft initiatives in the absence of the original state-backed services. Conflict can also deepen anti-government narratives, with exposure to violence serving as an acute reminder that the state, through its absence, has failed to protect its citizens.

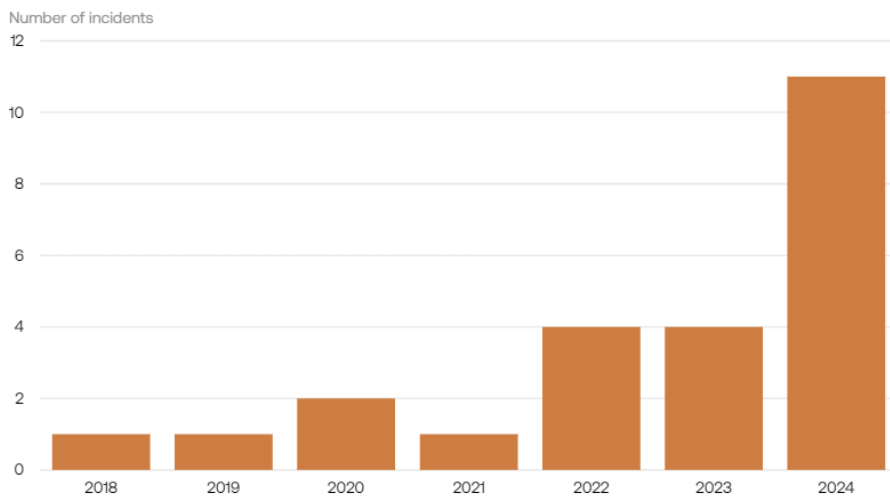
Destruction of Water Infrastructure to Induce Dependency

Water scarcity is increasingly severe in parts of the central Sahel's Liptako-Gourma region, making state-developed boreholes and infrastructure crucial for communities in climate-degraded areas. With annual rainfall patterns becoming more erratic and groundwater recharge rates dropping, especially in overexploited basins, sustainable water management is essential.

However, violent-extremist groups recognise both the presence and absence of these services as leverage to advance their own ambitions for popular control, using them to build dependency and reinforce their authority over local populations. The destruction of boreholes and water infrastructure is now a feature of JNIM and ISIS activity in the region, and between January 2019 and October 2024 there was a 40 per cent increase in the frequency of such attacks. Violent extremists routinely detonate IEDs attached to water pumps while also destroying these sites with gunfire.

FIGURE 9

Deliberate destruction of water infrastructure in the central Sahel



Source: ACLED data; TBI analysis

By destroying these critical access points, violent-extremist groups, including JNIM, which carried out more than 60 per cent of these offensives, effectively close these avenues for sustenance and survival. These attacks not only undermine the state and erode its apparatus but also force populations to rely on the violent extremists for access to drinkable water, securing the latter's control over both territory and communities. In addition, these groups use water as a tool for leverage, compelling local populations to support or even join their ranks in exchange for essential resources.

By fostering dependency on their control of scarce resources, JNIM and other groups can expand their influence, build intelligence networks and establish parallel governance. This strategy deepens communities' reliance on violent-extremist factions, creating a cycle where, deprived of basic needs, communities are left with few choices but to accept their terms for survival. Moreover, in 2024 there have been ten incidences (up from two in

2023) where the Malian army, alongside Africa Corps (the private military contractor formerly known as Wagner), deliberately targeted water infrastructure in civilian villages, including a Tuareg encampment. This strategy, aimed at intimidating particular ethnoreligious groups deemed by the government as conspiring with extremist groups, will likely further entrench reliance on violent-extremist factions in these areas.

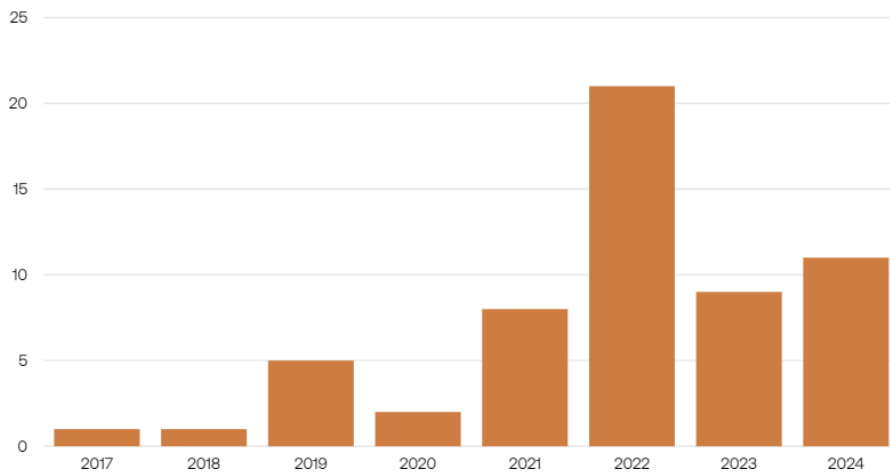
Attacking Mining Sites and Miners to Wield Greater Influence

Gold mining is crucial to the central Sahel's economy, particularly in Mali, which is one of Africa's leading gold producers. The industry provides income for thousands of artisanal miners – who often lack formal protections in what is a largely informal sector – and contributes significantly to the national economy. In many cases, as arable land and water supplies dwindle due to rising temperatures, erratic rainfall and desertification, communities that traditionally depended on farming and herding are increasingly turning to artisanal mining to survive. However, the sector's importance has also made it a prime target for exploitation by the violent-extremist groups JNIM and IS, who have recognised its potential for funding and consolidating territorial control.

According to our analysis, there was a two-fold increase in violent attacks on and abductions of miners between 2019 and 2024, and a major increase in violent-extremist groups actively operating in and around Sahelian mining sites.

FIGURE 10

Attacks on and abductions of miners in the central Sahel



Source: ACLED data; TBI analysis

By attacking or threatening miners, violent extremists can extort funds through “Islamic taxes” (*zakat*), essentially allowing them to control mining operations. These intimidation tactics are becoming more successful in eliminating resistance from local communities or competing criminal entities, strengthening the control violent extremists have over a particular territory.¹³ By targeting mining operations and smuggling the materials they produce via trafficking routes or the Sahel’s strong transnational organised-crime networks, violent-extremist factions can garner considerable revenue from the sale of trafficked items. While estimates vary, JNIM’s earnings from illicit activities are suspected to reach as much as \$35 million annually.¹⁴

By targeting mining operations, violent-extremist groups also further destabilise the region by preventing governments from benefitting economically from these sites and maintaining order in the areas surrounding them. Security risks around mining sites are now increasing as a result of the escalation in conflict. As violent extremists seek to maintain

control over resource supply chains and smuggling routes, both private and state-backed mining ventures face uncertainty over current and future extraction prospects.

Instability around Sahelian mining operations is particularly concerning given the role that informal artisanal mining plays in providing a degree of livelihood stability outside rain-fed agriculture, especially for women and girls. JNIM's expansion into southern Mali could double down on these socioeconomic impacts. Additionally, as the group gains greater access to the country's mineral wealth, its general operations will advance and scale, enabling further proliferation of violent-extremist activities in the region.

These compounded pressures not only worsen local economic insecurity but also feed a cycle: the impacts of climate change push more people towards jobs open to exploitation by violent extremism, thus amplifying the reach and funding of violent-extremist networks.

2. INSTITUTION OF STATECRAFT INITIATIVES

JNIM and IS-Sahel are developing mechanisms to administer justice and provide social support, food and other basic resources to vulnerable Sahelians. These initiatives are enabling violent-extremist groups to wield greater influence over communities and coerce small populations into becoming increasingly dependent on non-state forms of governance amid growing resource scarcity.

“Conflict-Resolution” Services for Worsening Land Disputes

Between 2019 and 2024, there were 76 recorded cases of land disputes turning violent.

With climate-induced scarcity driving up the number of farmer-herder disputes, and the state often entirely absent in resolving them, violent-extremist groups are now stepping in as mediators. This scenario is especially pertinent in Mali, where land distribution has historically been handled by the central government, and groups marginalised by land-distribution policies hold longstanding grievances.¹⁵ Islamist extremists take great pride in the distribution of criminal justice and judicial services, which

they view as integral to their de facto statecraft efforts. The provision of dispute resolution is another way for these actors to gather support from populations aggrieved by perceived state neglect.

In Tillabéry, Niger, some communities view IS-Sahel as more competent at resolving land disputes and protecting livestock assets from opposition tribes than the government. Similarly, in parts of Burkina Faso, some citizens will actively prioritise “jihadist” counsel over their own state services to resolve land disputes. In Nassoumbou, one group of villagers agreed to adhere to strict Islamic rules and “provide support to militants” in return for protection against enemy tribes.¹⁶ Community leaders claim that seeking militant support for land and cattle-rustling disputes is a “last resort”, but one that mainly stems from a lack of support from state institutions and a consequent breakdown in localised grievance mechanisms.

Climate change is set to intensify the reliance on these informal “dispute-resolution” services provided by violent-extremist groups. As environmental degradation worsens and resources such as arable land and water become increasingly scarce, competition for these essentials will only escalate, amplifying the frequency and severity of farmer-herder conflicts and land disputes. With state institutions already strained or absent, these climate-induced pressures create even greater openings for violent-extremist groups such as JNIM and IS-Sahel to position themselves as indispensable authorities in conflict resolution. This dynamic not only deepens local dependency on militant ‘justice’ systems but also enables these groups to further embed their influence, turning scarcity-driven grievances into a strategic tool to consolidate their power and legitimacy across vulnerable communities.

Winning Hearts and Minds With Food and Basic Resources

In the face of worsening climate-change-induced scarcity and ineffective governance, violent-extremist groups are increasingly stepping in as alternative providers for resource-deprived communities in the Sahel. This particular statecraft initiative is among the most crucial for the groups seeking to bolster their standing and expand their influence in the Liptako-Gourma area.

As drought, desertification and unpredictable rainfall drive food shortages and intensify poverty, violent extremists are exploiting these conditions to capitalise on the state's absence and build support by distributing essential supplies. Often positioning themselves as de facto authorities, militants working on behalf of groups such as JNIM and IS-Sahel present themselves as charitable caregivers. In Mali, it has been documented that both groups hand out stashes of maize – a limited, highly sought-after commodity – to win over local populations left underserved by the state.¹⁷

In Niger, militants have also strategically targeted the country's most poverty-stricken *cercles* (districts) of Douentza, Ténenkou and Youwarou, where food insecurity is rife and government and international aid has struggled to reach vulnerable populations. One local described his support for factions bearing food packages as “zero-option”, saying: “A hungry man is not free; if someone offers food for your starving children, you will follow them.”¹⁸ IS-Sahel militants are also documented distributing food and resources in areas of Burkina Faso.

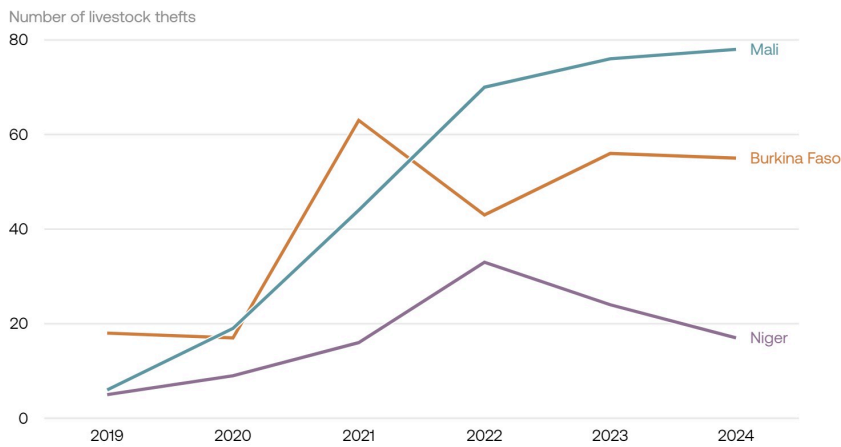
As climate stressors worsen in the region, and resources become scarcer, Sahelians could become more dependent on these welfare-driven statecraft initiatives. This will advance both JNIM and IS-Sahel's ambition to pull local populations away from the state, stoke anti-state sentiment and attract Sahelians toward their own spheres of extremist influence.

Sustaining Operations, Strengthening Influence and Exploiting Anti-State Narratives Through Cattle Theft and Asset Recovery

Resource scarcity in the Sahel does not only impact local communities – it affects violent-extremist groups as well, forcing them to seek new means to sustain their operations. The Liptako-Gourma region – the epicentre of violent-extremist activity – has been particularly affected by this. Historically populated by pastoralists of the Fulani, Tuareg and Gourma groups, the area has been heavily targeted by violent-extremist groups engaged in livestock rustling. Between January 2019 and October 2024, TBI analysis finds that there were 649 incidents where either JNIM or IS-Sahel were involved in livestock theft (a 417 per cent increase over that period), with nearly half (45 per cent) of this occurring in Mali alone.

FIGURE 11

Country-by-country increase in livestock-theft incidents by terrorist groups

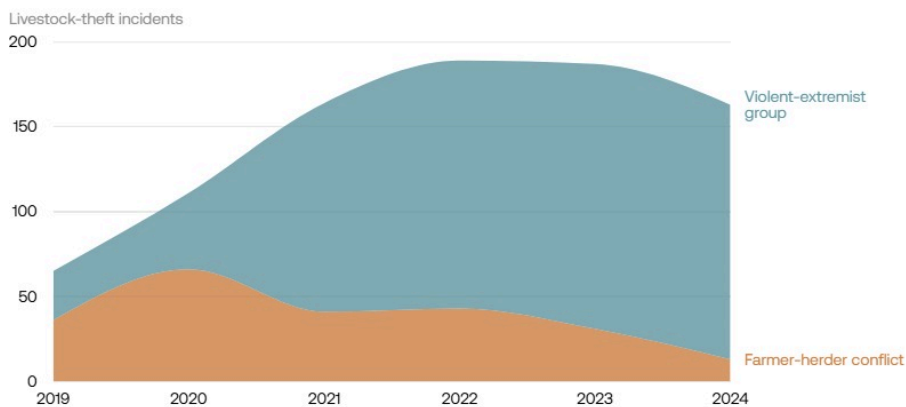


Source: ACLED data; TBI analysis

By stealing livestock, not only do violent-extremist groups ensure a continuous supply of meat to sustain their forces, especially in remote areas where access to food can be difficult, but they also guarantee an additional revenue stream by trading stolen animals. This disrupts the local informal economy by reducing capital and agency within pastoral groups. In the past few years, violent extremists have come to surpass farmer-herder disputes as the primary perpetrators of animal theft, dominating incidents of livestock rustling across the region. In fact, in 2024, violent-extremist groups were responsible for 92 per cent of livestock thefts (compared with 45 per cent in 2019).

FIGURE 12

Extremist groups are responsible for more cattle theft than farmer-herder conflicts



Source: ACLED data; TBI analysis

These thefts widen longstanding grievances between the state and pastoralists – who see the state as responsible for ensuring their livestock are not stolen – and further create inroads for violent-extremist groups. At the same time, ethnic militias are taking on responsibility for protecting pastoralists and their financial assets (from hostilities with other ethnic groups and more recently from terrorist groups), further fuelling cyclical violence and conflict proliferation.

Locals have stated that “Nigerien security forces do little to prevent raids or recover stolen animals”.¹⁹ After agreeing to pay *zakat* to violent extremists, herders felt raids had reduced in number. In addition, since 2019 only 56 per cent of livestock recoveries have been led by the state in the central Sahel, demonstrating the increased relevance of ethnic-protection militias, which often take on the role of recovering livestock when raids do take place.

By providing de facto statecraft services to mediate the growing number of

resource-related disputes, non-state actors – including extremist groups and ethnic militias – are capitalising on the worsening climate-change-induced scarcity that causes those disputes. In addition, if the state's visible presence diminishes due to conflict expansion and the entrenchment of violent-extremist groups, this could strengthen the relationship between non-state actors and deprived communities, further complicating the patchwork of security and service provision.

At the same time, vulnerable communities continue to face economic exploitation at the hands of violent extremists through property theft, which then causes anti-state narratives to harden among aggrieved Sahelians, who feel let down by the government services that should be protecting them. Over time, this creates new channels through which violent-extremist groups can exploit these grievances, often leaving people with little option but to acquiesce, collaborate and ultimately join these groups.

3. EFFECTIVE SCALING OF STRATEGIC RECRUITMENT CAMPAIGNS

In response to growing opportunities presented by local instability and resource scarcity, JNIM and IS-Sahel have intensified their recruitment campaigns, actively targeting vulnerable populations in the Sahel. These campaigns are strategically designed to exploit socioeconomic grievances, offering financial incentives, social support and a sense of belonging to those disillusioned with state governance. By scaling their efforts, violent-extremist groups are expanding their ranks and embedding themselves deeper within communities, increasing their influence and reinforcing non-state control over local populations.

Exploiting the Intersection of Youth Vulnerability, Negative Climate-Change Impacts and the Informal Economy

Amid escalating climate pressures, resource scarcity in the Sahel has deepened economic hardship, leaving many young people – who make up the majority of the informal economy's workforce – at particular risk of

exploitation. As the total amount of arable land shrinks, water becomes more scarce and agriculture suffers the effects of erratic weather patterns, leaving young people with fewer livelihood options. This climate-induced scarcity is often drawing young people into the orbit of violent-extremist groups like JNIM and IS-Sahel. Recognising this, these groups have adjusted their recruitment strategies to specifically target young men who feel disenfranchised and economically marginalised.

Recruitment into groups including JNIM and IS-Sahel tends to skew towards youth, with many targeted in their late teens to mid-20s. However, recruitment can start as young as 12 to 14 years old, especially in regions facing severe economic hardship and resource scarcity.

While presenting their members as leaders and revolutionaries is often effective in attracting potential recruits, the promise of a sustainable livelihood, or food and resources, is the primary way in which violent-extremist factions lure impressionable youth. Five years ago, the average salary for militant recruits was up to \$600 a month – three times the average salary a teacher could earn in Burkina Faso.²⁰

Additionally, a bonus of roughly \$800 was on offer to anyone who was willing to carry out attacks on behalf of violent Islamist extremist groups, including JNIM and the group now known as IS-Sahel. While current salaries are difficult to determine, these AQ- and IS-affiliated groups continue to exploit material deprivation to attract youth, particularly in areas hardest hit by climate-driven resource shortages, where economic alternatives are severely limited.

As climate change intensifies, resource scarcity will likely worsen, driving even more young people into the informal economy and increasing their vulnerability to exploitation. Additionally, if state responses remain inadequate or slow, reliance on violent-extremist groups for economic support may grow. These drivers, coupled with mounting social fragmentation, create a precarious environment that could further entrench violent-extremist influence across the Sahel.

Recruiting Along Ethnoreligious Lines and From Resource-Scarce Communities

Violent-extremist factions in Africa, including the central Sahel, often adopt strategies to recruit along ethnoreligious lines, primarily due to synergies with their own militant base. While the vast majority of ethnic groups in the central Sahel, including the Tuareg, Berabiche, Gourma and Fulani, oppose the violent Islamist ideologies espoused by these extremists, recruitment is increasing due to push factors related to resource scarcity. Many Fulani communities attribute their paucity of resources to a lack of government support, which is fomenting a growing alliance between some Fulani pastoralists and violent-extremist factions, particularly JNIM. According to our analysis, there has been a 60 per cent increase in the past five years in violent attacks involving the Fulani and various opposition ethnic and clan-based groups including the Dan Na Ambassagou – a militia formed in 2016 to protect Dogon communities from violent Islamist extremists amid rising tensions with the Fulani.

In many cases, these Fulani herders are launching attacks alongside JNIM militants, creating a two-pronged trend: Fulani-led attacks are rising due to the strengthened logistical, troop and armoury support they receive from groups including JNIM, while ethnic groups and clans such as the Dogon – traditionally sedentary farmers – are increasing their targeting of Fulani herders due to their affiliation with violent Islamist extremist entities. The deepening of pre-existing tensions between the Fulani and other ethnic groups is further exacerbated by government forces and private military companies working with the Dan Na Ambassagou and other ethnic militias.

In Mali, as unpredictable weather patterns and climate-induced scarcity increase, the Fulani migratory movement – transhumance – is propelling them further southwards. At the same time, the conflict in Mali has also begun to move in the same direction. This is enhancing the probability of Fulani herders confronting violent-extremist elements and, simultaneously, increasing the probability of violent extremists being able to conduct recruitment campaigns among this ethnic group.

As climate change continues to force Fulani groups to seek more fertile pastures, the likelihood of violent-extremist groups operating with small numbers of Fulani will increase. It also means factions such as JNIM will be able to secure greater control of territory, prolonging conflict in the central Sahel.

06

How Regional and Global Dynamics Undermine Stability Efforts

Shifting political dynamics in the central Sahel are eroding the region's capacity to confront the interconnected crises of climate insecurity and conflict.

Recent military coups in Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso have fractured national governance structures, significantly undermining the efficacy of state-led responses to climate-driven security threats. TBI's analysis has shown that the resulting fragilities have produced vacuums that violent-extremist groups such as JNIM and IS-Sahel have strategically exploited. These groups are embedding themselves within marginalised communities, assuming control over vital resources such as water, land and mineral deposits. This resource capture not only allows these groups to consolidate local power and influence but also destabilises economies traditionally sustained by livestock and farming. Consequently, resource scarcity and disruption to livelihoods exacerbate existing societal vulnerabilities, fuelling cycles of competition, displacement and entrenched insecurity that further complicate policy responses and weaken state authority.

At a regional level, political disunity among Sahelian states will hinder coordinated responses to cross-border climate and security threats, leaving regional governance gaps that JNIM and IS-Sahel can exploit to gain control.

Regional Disunity

The recent formation of the Alliance of Sahel States (ASS) by Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso and their anticipated withdrawal from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) in January 2025 underscore the growing fragmentation of West Africa. Their departure from the regional grouping, prompted by ECOWAS's sanctions following the recent coups, disrupts essential multilateral frameworks for tackling shared crises such as

climate-induced migration, transnational violent extremism and resource competition. Historically ECOWAS has driven cooperation in areas fundamental to stability, such as agriculture, energy, monetary policy and youth development. These coordinated efforts have reinforced regional security by stabilising livelihoods and reducing competition over resources. However, ASS's isolationist stance threatens to weaken these collaborative frameworks, creating further space for groups such as JNIM and IS-Sahel to intensify strategic offensives that entrench their hold on populations, including via resource control.

KEY REGULATORY FRAMEWORKS COULD BE UNDERMINED

The ASS's isolationism could disrupt pastoralists' seasonal migration, which is traditionally regulated through ECOWAS's 1979 Protocol on Free Movement. Without coordinated agreements, bottlenecks and overgrazing could occur in resource-limited areas, escalating the resource-related conflicts documented between herders and farmers, and creating larger gaps for violent-extremist groups and ethnic-protection militias to fill as resource controllers. Ultimately, this will deepen vulnerabilities to violent extremists among pastoralist and farming populations alike. With regulatory frameworks undermined, JNIM and IS-Sahel will continue to establish state-like authority and expand recruitment. This will particularly affect, and could further marginalise, groups at the heart of the conflict, including Fulani herders in Mali and Tuareg pastoralists – both of whom rely on access to grazing lands and water across borders to sustain their livelihoods.

Similarly, diminished collaboration also threatens ECOWAS's 2005 Agricultural Policy (ECOWAP), limiting climate-adaptive agricultural strategies and worsening food insecurity amid ongoing droughts and climate variability.

AS REGIONAL COHESION ERODES, COUNTRIES MAY PRIORITISE NATIONAL INTERESTS

The growing estrangement of the central Sahelian states will place considerable strain on economic development and stabilisation efforts across the wider West African region. For ECOWAS states such as Benin,

Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Nigeria and Togo, the ASS's withdrawal could entrench resource competition and restrict the potential for collective crisis management. This growing fragmentation risks driving the remaining ECOWAS members to prioritise their own national interests over regional objectives by effectively diminishing the perceived opportunity cost of cohesive action and, ultimately, weakening regional commitment to address transnational climate and security crises collaboratively. This erosion of regional cohesion will further expose the Sahel to the expansion of extremism, perpetuating cycles of conflict, resource scarcity and extremist modes of governance, including the ability of extremists to preside over their own justice mediation in resource-based disputes.

CASE STUDY

The WAP Complex

The WAP Complex (W-Arly-Pendjari), a 26,361-square-kilometre reserve spanning Benin, Burkina Faso and Niger, has become a strategic asset for violent-extremist groups, who exploit the increasing climate-induced scarcity of resources for recruitment and territorial control. Since 2018 factions linked to AQ and IS, including Ansarul Islam and Katiba Serma, have leveraged drought and desertification pressures to strengthen ties with local pastoralist communities. These groups circumvent state restrictions on land use by promising access to fertile grasslands within the park, undermining conservation efforts while furthering their influence over the local populace.

This strategic shift by violent-extremist groups from purely military tactics to resource manipulation speaks to a broader trend in the Sahel, whereby fragmented governance exacerbates the impacts of climate and security threats. Weak policy coordination across the tri-border region has allowed violent-extremist groups to establish control with minimal interference, as shown by a 2021 aerial survey that reported approximately 63,000 head of cattle grazing illegally in the Park W segment of the WAP Complex.²¹ The park's cross-border location, combined with the disparate policies of Benin, Burkina Faso and Niger, has left it vulnerable to encroachment by armed groups, effectively transforming it into a refuge for these groups, as state-led interventions are inhibited by the local civilian population.

Disputes over jurisdiction and limited cooperative frameworks mean that Benin, Burkina Faso and Niger operate in isolation, using strategies that struggle to keep pace with the militants' resource-control tactics. While ECOWAS could serve as a coordinating body to address shared security and environmental challenges, the planned withdrawal of Mali, Niger and

Burkina Faso in early 2025 will likely reduce its capacity to facilitate transnational responses and will probably worsen existing coordination gaps. Furthermore, resource dependencies created by the ASS's alignment with non-Western powers – primarily focusing on extractive industries rather than sustainable development – limit the scope for comprehensive environmental and socioeconomic initiatives that could otherwise bolster community resilience.

Local policy measures have also been insufficient. While Benin has increased park-ranger patrols, violent attacks against them have escalated: in June 2024, five rangers and seven Beninese security personnel were killed in Benin's Park W alone.²² These assaults have weakened the state's physical presence, further isolating communities and allowing violent-extremist groups to operate informal courts that resolve local disputes and enforce their own governance frameworks. The loss of state oversight means these groups have greater access to strategic resources within the park and can establish quasi-legal structures to secure local legitimacy. By entrenching their influence, these groups drive the cycles of resource scarcity, displacement and conflict previously outlined, effectively embedding themselves within communities.

This absence of coordinated political action and resource-sharing frameworks underscores the urgent need for a Sahel Compact to bolster regional and cross-border policy mechanisms. This approach would enable more unified responses to climate-induced vulnerabilities, tackling both resource scarcity and security issues. A cohesive compact could address the fragmented governance that currently undermines responses to the region's interconnected climate and security challenges, creating a platform for cooperation and resilience-building in critical transnational ecosystems such as the WAP Complex.

Geopolitical Shifts

Intensifying geopolitical competition is further complicating regional efforts to tackle climate change and bring about conflict stabilisation. The void left by diminished Western involvement in the region has allowed non-Western powers, particularly Russia, to gain a foothold; these powers are aligning with Sahelian states as they increasingly seek alternatives to Western partnerships. This ultimately erodes these states' commitment to addressing shared transnational issues through sustained collaboration.

INCREASING RUSSIAN INFLUENCE IS IMPEDING PROGRESS IN THE CENTRAL SAHEL

Russia's expanding influence in the central Sahel is exacerbating political and economic complexity. The ASS's alignment with non-Western powers, particularly Russia, is polarising the region and increasing dependence on Africa Corps within ASS countries. This polarisation and growing isolationism are placing limits on support from the broader international community, including United Nations relief-coordination efforts, further damaging sustainable development and resilience initiatives. External actors such as Africa Corps exploit the same governance vacuums as violent-extremist groups, and growing reliance on those actors by governments further weakens local capacity to address challenges such as water-infrastructure protection and food security.

Moreover, there are early signs that the central Sahel, through its alignment with Russia, is likely to be drawn into the internationalisation of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, with recent developments including alleged Ukrainian support for ethnic militias in Mali that are fighting against the government and Africa Corps. This has the potential to alter the conflict landscape by empowering these militias, whose activities are deeply intertwined with competition for scarce resources such as grazing land and water. As these militias gain strength, the region's resource-based tensions risk being intensified, further complicating efforts to address the root causes of instability.

While Russia provides the ASS countries with an alternative to ECOWAS, the

benefits of engaging with Russia primarily centre on investments in extractive sectors, such as gold and uranium, and security services, including counterterrorism and mining protection provided by Africa Corps, rather than on comprehensive socioeconomic development. Over the longer term, such narrow security and economic dependency could restrict the ASS's capacity to address essential needs such as climate adaptation, health and economic diversification.

In particular, the ASS's reliance on extractive resources – of which Russia, Iran and others are buyers – also constrains long-term resilience-building, perpetuating cycles of scarcity and underdevelopment that reinforce the region's vulnerabilities. A Russia-ASS alliance could also further undermine global frameworks such as the Great Green Wall Initiative and the Paris Agreement, which support sustainable land restoration and climate adaptation, by diverting focus from essential climate-resilience efforts to extraction-led short-term economic gains.

DISUNITY IS REDUCING THE EFFICACY OF REGIONAL BLOCS

The ASS countries' geopolitical shift towards Russia is weakening regional blocs such as ECOWAS and the African Union (AU), reducing their capacity to influence Sahelian governance towards stability, hampering responses to transnational threats and hindering the implementation of long-term climate-resilience initiatives.

Without new, cohesive policy approaches, the ASS's disengagement from global frameworks could create regulatory gaps. For example, smuggling and trafficking, including JNIM's illicit gold operations in Mali, could escalate. Moreover, limited regional cohesion in critical areas such as agriculture, water management and energy provision could exacerbate climate vulnerabilities by isolating the central Sahel not only from ECOWAS's initiatives addressing food security and resource scarcity, but also the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the European Union's Green Deal initiatives. Meanwhile, regional disunity could impede regulatory oversight of cross-border trade and movement, while curbing the free movement of people. These obstacles intensify the significant challenges of climate-induced displacement, seasonal migration and resource-based

conflict taking root in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger.

The shift by ASS countries away from regional blocs and multilateral frameworks will also have implications further afield. According to the EU, the ASS's withdrawal is weakening ECOWAS's 2008 Common Approach on Migration which, through channels such as the Rabat Process, aligns migration policies with EU interests. As the ASS distances itself from these international frameworks, ECOWAS is likely to prioritise intra-regional migration, potentially reducing Europe's influence on migration-related issues in the central Sahel and therefore complicating efforts to manage climate-driven migration flows into the EU.

More broadly, the isolationism of the ASS countries poses a clear threat to collaborative efforts aimed at stabilising the Sahel and addressing the root causes of insecurity across the region. These efforts include the 2019 Global Fragility Act and the 2015 UN Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism, which together seek to strengthen borders, enhance climate resilience and reinforce governance to contain conflict and counteract recruitment efforts. Additionally, globally interlinked initiatives such as the Sahel Resilience Project and the 2015 Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction, which combine to promote resilience-building and risk management in vulnerable areas, could become redundant as the ASS further solidifies its isolationist agenda. There is a subsequent risk that violent extremists and other non-state armed groups continue to benefit from the chasms in global policy efforts derived from the isolationism of ASS countries to expand and spread the conflict across Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger.

CASE STUDY

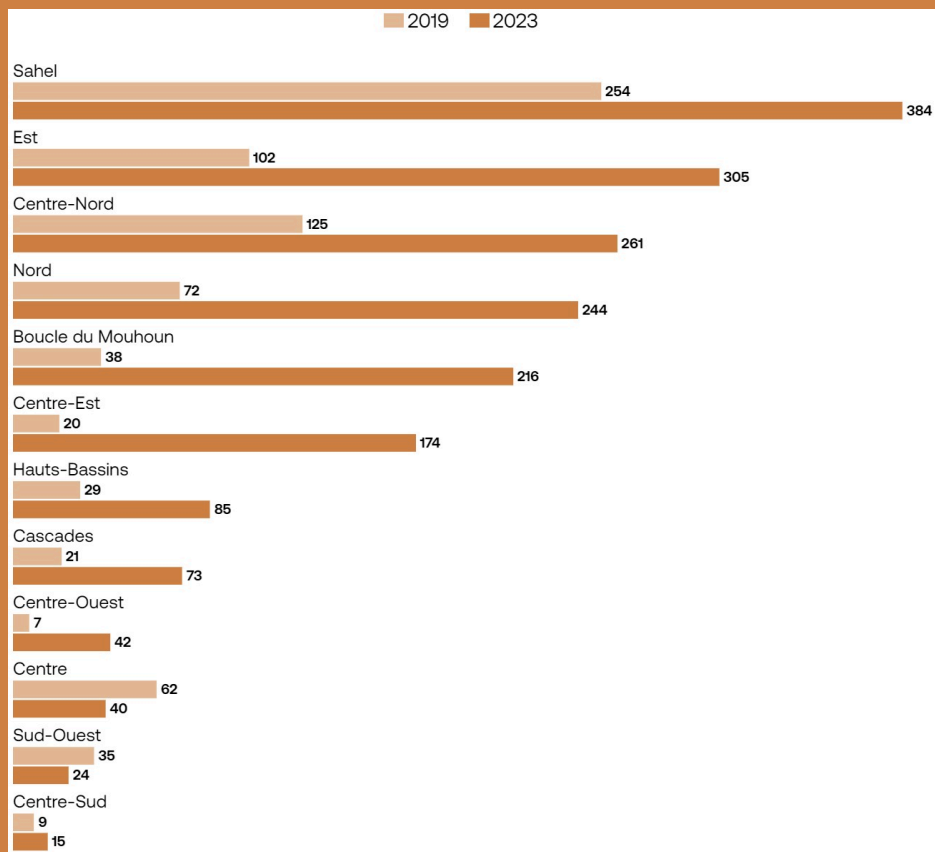
Climate-Induced Migration From Burkina Faso to Europe

Given the seasonal nature of agricultural employment and its heavy reliance on the informal workforce, migratory activity in Burkina Faso is typically high. However, with the rise of climate-induced scarcity and violent extremism, ever-higher numbers of Sahelians are now being forced to move to an extent beyond more regularised migration patterns. With the breakdown of regional cooperation in West Africa and growing discontent with European support (levelled particularly heavily at France), tackling climate-induced migration will require a reworked and re-engaged approach from both the West African and European sides.

Since 2019, nearly every region in Burkina Faso has seen a surge in conflict. In parallel, there has been a 110 per cent increase in climate-related incidents over the same period. By early 2024, Burkina Faso recorded 1.9 million displaced people nationwide. This will likely rise in future as vulnerable populations look to escape conflict and search for more stable economic opportunities elsewhere. Migratory corridors to the north are experiencing increased usage.

FIGURE 13

Conflict is escalating in nearly every region of Burkina Faso



The Centre Nord region of Burkina Faso has seen a two-fold increase in climate-induced conflict since 2019 and is one of the areas most affected by

this type of conflict. In particular, Kaya, the capital of Centre Nord's Sanmatenga province, is seeing a notable influx of displaced people.

As an urban centre, Kaya attracts displaced people who hope to access basic services and humanitarian support. However, over time, as these displaced communities encounter poor economic opportunities and insufficient aid, many leave Kaya and start heading north towards the Nigerien city of Agadez. These migrants typically use Burkina Faso's Est region – which, according to TBI analysis, is itself the region most affected by climate-induced conflict – as a transit corridor.

FIGURE 14

Migration route from Burkina Faso to Europe



Agadez is considered one of the last key transit points for displaced people in the central Sahel. From there, migrants cross into Libya and Algeria, paying smugglers in cities such as Sabha and Tripoli in Libya, and Tamanrasset and Algiers in Algeria. These act as key gateways to the Mediterranean and Europe.

As climate-induced conflict in Burkina Faso continues to escalate, migration flows towards Europe will likely increase. Towns such as Kaya are already overwhelmed by displaced populations and struggling with limited resources, meaning that the migratory pressure along transit routes, for instance through Agadez, will intensify. In turn, European countries – especially Italy – will face additional challenges managing migration flows, which could turn out to be even larger than in the 2015 migration crisis.

This migration chain reflects a vicious cycle. As environmental degradation worsens and conflict spreads, the political capital that central Sahelian governments possess to tackle such issues is reduced. At the same time, external governments see such intractable situations as an opportunity to take up bilateral arrangements – such as Italy’s renewed engagement on Sahelian and North African migration – that themselves often threaten to undermine wider collective action.

Restricting migration flows or implementing border controls will address short-term symptoms. However, without investment in climate adaptation and conflict resolution in the Sahel, migration pressures will continue to mount, putting both African and European systems under further strain. For this to be addressed, policy alignment and close cooperation are paramount, although the ASS’s disengagement from ECOWAS and opportunistic Russian actions make both of these immeasurably harder to achieve.

ANTI-WESTERN NARRATIVES COULD INFLUENCE THE NEXT GENERATION

The formation of the ASS also threatens to fundamentally reshape the central Sahel's future. As the ASS widens its separation from global partnerships, anti-Western sentiment is likely to be further fuelled by its stance towards Western powers such as France and the United States. Leaders of Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger are increasingly positioning themselves as reclaiming African sovereignty from foreign influence and framing their policies as a push to "take back Africa" from perceived Western control, capitalising on existing frustrations with Western interventions that have often been seen as ineffective or self-serving.

This rhetoric strengthens nationalist narratives that paint Western powers as exploiters of African resources and autonomy, feeding public distrust and resentment. The withdrawal or reduction of Western support also reinforces the perception that Africa must look elsewhere for alliances, pushing communities towards alternative, non-Western powers and deepening divisions with the West. The perpetuation of these narratives could have profound, long-term effects on the mindsets of the next generation of Sahelians, fomenting greater distrust of international cooperation and alignment with non-Western powers. This shift could entrench cycles of conflict, hinder sustainable development and further destabilise the region for decades to come.

07

Conclusion and Recommendations

The urgent need for a cohesive Sahel Compact capable of tackling the region's interconnected crises is evident. By fostering multilateral partnerships, this Compact could revitalise regional and international cooperation, aligning policy frameworks across the ASS, ECOWAS and other global stakeholders. It would prioritise climate resilience and security collaboration, creating a unified platform to address complex challenges while bridging the divisions that currently inhibit effective action. This Compact is crucial to counteract escalating insecurity and aligns with previous findings on the need for sustainable, cooperative frameworks to dismantle the cycles of scarcity and conflict afflicting the Sahel.

As a coalition of West African governments, international actors, and both traditional and emerging powers, the Sahel Compact has an opportunity to leverage diverse expertise, financing and influence to counteract the challenges of regional disunity and build a more sustainable future for the Sahel. To this end, the Compact should pursue four strategic priorities to actively tackle the dual crises of climate and security across the region:

Regional Climate-Security and Coordinated Counterterrorism Initiatives

The Compact would unify counterterrorism and intelligence-sharing efforts among member states, focusing on climate-related security threats. These efforts would address resource-based recruitment by extremist groups and strengthen security in key areas such as transhumance routes and protected lands. Enhanced coordination would also allow for joint security operations, making it more challenging for militants to control resources and build local influence by providing access to restricted lands. The Compact should enhance cross-border operations by:

- **Establishing a regional Climate-Security Coordination Hub** as a centre of excellence in West Africa. The climate-security hub would work with governments, civil society and international donors to address

vulnerabilities and prevent external powers such as Russia from exploiting instability.

- **Initiating Climate-Security Action Plans** specifically designed for the region, focusing on sustainable resource management and conservation of strategic sites such as the WAP Complex.
- **Serving as a knowledge-sharing platform**, with Climate-Security Action Plans for the Sahel aiming to draw insights from, and share findings with, other institutes in Africa and the rest of the world. This would create a West Africa-based repository for best practice in the climate-security space for practitioners and researchers to support and learn from by pooling their data collection and monitoring efforts.

Cross-Border Migration and Mobility Frameworks

The Compact should seek to harmonise migration policies to reduce inter-state tension and provide economic stability for communities reliant on seasonal movement, minimising resource-related conflicts that fuel extremist control in rural areas. This should include protecting and regulating migration corridors, preserving existing cross-border livelihood initiatives and supporting new systems for climate migrants to reduce the vulnerabilities that arise from displacement. The Compact should enhance migration and mobility frameworks by:

- **Bolstering frameworks for managing cross-border migration** to standardise safe and regulated movement, particularly for pastoralist and displaced populations.
- **Creating an inter-governmental coordination strategy**, whereby the Compact can serve as a forum to improve coordination between West African governments, which is necessary in times of acute resource scarcity, such as drought. This would allow national governments to release coordinated messaging to their citizens on services that are available and empower local governments in border regions to work collaboratively to manage migration flows and resource delivery. This forward planning would ensure that migration is managed to reduce climate-induced tensions, which would otherwise undermine regional stability.

- **Supporting sustainable land use in key border areas** through dedicated programmes and knowledge sharing. This could be bolstered by deploying Climate-Security Action Plans with a focus on grievance resolution.

Climate-Resilient Economic Growth

The Compact should seek to address resource concerns – such as water scarcity, desertification and land degradation – within and between states to alleviate competition over resources, which fuels local grievances and enables extremist recruitment. To decrease dependence on extractive industries, the Compact should also promote economic diversification more widely across West Africa, encouraging investments in renewable energy and sustainable agriculture. This diversification would create new employment opportunities, especially for young people, thereby countering the appeal of extremist recruitment based on economic promises. These initiatives would be aligned with climate-resilience goals, helping to build robust local economies better suited to withstanding environmental shocks. The Compact should enable climate-resilient economic growth by:

- **Deploying community-driven resilience strategies** focusing on adaptive measures to counter environmental degradation and stabilise resource-dependent economies, reducing susceptibility to militant influence.
- **Creating a partnerships platform** to facilitate international partnerships, such as with the African Development Bank, to co-finance large-scale renewable-energy projects, while private-public partnerships would be leveraged for sustainable agriculture programmes. This financing would provide long-term capital, reducing reliance on extractive economies and promoting sustainable growth across the region.

Mobilising International Financing

The Sahel Compact should mobilise private-sector and international financing to boost investments in renewable energy and climate-adaptive infrastructure, providing much-needed stability to populations vulnerable to

violent-extremist influence. By prioritising financial partnerships, the Compact can drive sustainable economic growth and improve resilience to climate impacts. The Compact should mobilise international financing by:

- **Creating a Climate-Security Fund** within the Compact to prioritise sustainable agriculture, water conservation and cross-border environmental protection in order to build climate resilience. This fund would finance projects such as border infrastructure, real-time intelligence-sharing technology and training programmes for counterterrorism forces to enhance climate-security measures in vulnerable areas.
- **Creating a Diversified Development Fund** to target migration, security, economic development and governance. This fund would support border infrastructure, emergency housing and displacement-monitoring to manage resource competition. It would also back local agriculture, renewable energy and capacity-building initiatives, fostering resilience and strengthening regional stability.

08

Methodology

This paper employs a mixed-method approach to analyse the complex interplay between climate change, socioeconomic vulnerabilities and the rise of non-state actors in the central Sahel. Our methodology is structured around two core levels of analysis: bottom up and top down. We employ a multidisciplinary analytical framework, integrating perspectives from current political debate, environmental science and conflict resolution. This enables a holistic understanding of how local and global dynamics interact to drive conflict and instability in the Sahel.

Geography

The data used for our analysis cover the central Sahel region, comprising Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger. We focus on Liptako-Gourma, the tri-state border area encompassing parts of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, that is the epicentre of the conflict.

Data Set

We employed the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED) data set and open-source material to create an in-house custom data set, with our own direct coding of individual events. Our data set looked at the period from January 2019 to October 2024. In addition to ACLED fields, TBI generated bespoke fields to analyse specific events and produce analysis that explored the intersection of climate and security in the central Sahel.

Custom fields included:

- Water clashes
- Targeting of significant water worker
- Attacks while collecting water
- Attacks on water infrastructure
- Burning of crop fields
- Livestock thefts
- Killing of livestock

- Recovery of stolen livestock
- Abductions of farmers
- Killings of farmers
- Abductions of herders
- Killings of herders
- Incident of farmer-herder conflict
- Land disputes
- Ethnic-militia protection
- Protest over land-grievance management

Data Verification

A multiphase cleaning and verification process was essential. Inaccurate or contradictory information was flagged in the original ACLED data set during the first phase of building on the data set.

Sources

Multiple sources were used to verify accounts and information related to incidents recorded. In addition to the ACLED data set, reports, briefings and official violent-extremist and armed-group materials (such as statements and propaganda) were used to corroborate facts and reporting of incidents.

Geolocation

Geocoding was conducted at provincial and neighbourhood levels. The latitude and longitude of each incident was recorded to allow for Geographic Information System (GIS) mapping of activity. Occasionally, the exact geolocation of an incident could not be verified. If there was a discrepancy in reporting where an incident took place or if reporting suggested the incident took place along a border, the incident was assigned to a town near the area where conflict or extremist activity was known to be taking place, based on the likelihood that the incident was in line with overwhelming trends.

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