The French Barkhane Force in the south of Mali
Photo: Wikimedia Commons

'Silencing the guns' in the Sahel region?

In February 2022, France's President Emmanuel Macron announced that French forces would be exiting Mali, where they have been fighting violent extremists since 2013. France would be redeploying its troops in neighbouring Niger, another former French colony beset with violent extremism, and the biggest supplier of uranium that is fuelling France's nuclear power stations. However, increased militarisation in the Sahel region has failed to stem attacks by extremist groups. In a 2019 article in Africa Insight, Cheryl Hendricks, then Executive Director of the HSRC's Africa Institute of South Africa, and Tochukwu Omenma of the University of Nigeria argued that a focus on military tactics has in fact been counter-productive to the AU's aim of 'silencing the guns' in this region. Recent developments in the region support this view, writes **Andrea Teagle**.

Many of the countries in the Sahel region are beset by poverty, uneven development, inequality and governance challenges, and natural resources are mined for the benefit of other nations. As temperatures rise, desertification has increased. These are not conditions in which much thrives. But, across the region, which extends from Senegal eastward to Sudan, violent extremist groups – with various local and international links – have mushroomed. Responsible for brutal civilian attacks, such organisations exploit poor governance to gain footholds of support and reliance. For example, extremist groups in Mali and Burkina Faso stepped in to provide water and sanitation in certain areas during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Boko Haram, al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), the Islamic State in the Greater Sahar (ISIS-GS), and the umbrella organisation, Jamaat Nasr al Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM), among other groups in the Sahel, have also spurred the growing presence of local, regional and international military troops. These include the French Barkhane Force, the Multinational Joint Task Force (targeting Boko Haram

in Nigeria, Niger and others), and the G5 Joint Force of the Sahel. International funding comes mostly from France and the USA. Hendricks and Omenma note that, among the fragile states in the region, increased militarisation deepens and creates new dependence on foreign forces for security and humanitarian assistance.

The HSRC's Puleng Hlanyane, of the Africa Institute of South Africa division, warns that the decline of French influence in Mali opens the doors for other powers such as China, Russia and Turkey to step in. On the other hand, she adds, "the withdrawal of the French troops is not entirely negative because having security provided by a foreign power impedes political development."

Evidence bears this out. Despite the presence of foreign troops for more than a decade, peace and stability have evaded the region. The year 2021 saw a 70% increase in violent extremist attacks in the Sahel, according to the Africa Centre for Strategic Studies. Additionally, more civilians in Mali and Burkina Faso died at the hands of

security forces – comprising national and foreign troops – than as a result of violent extremist attacks or communal violence in 2020, according to the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project. Such state atrocities fuel distrust of governments, feed into extremist group propaganda, and contribute to the widespread impression of 'terrorists on both sides' in these countries.

Fragile states

Militarisation in response to violent extremism diverts funds away from socioeconomic and human security challenges that have complex colonial and contemporary roots. Despite an abundance of natural resources, Hendricks and Omenma write, many of the governments in the Sahel are unable to fulfil the basic functions of a state – to provide human security, which includes meeting social and economic needs. Rural communities near borders have particularly poor access to basic services, such as healthcare, education, electricity, water and sanitation. Foreign troops have tended to focus on protecting their own interests, which sometimes run counter to the needs of local communities.

Hlanyane and her colleague Nicasius Achu Check observe that governments' inability to operate in remote areas is a major obstacle to the AU's Silencing the Guns initiative. 'The absence of the state in the nooks and crannies of the continent has undermined peace and security,' they write. They add that the presence of local chiefs in these areas has created parallel structures that divide the loyalty of the populations. State corruption is also widespread, justice systems tend to be weak, certain groups are marginalised, and in some cases, military governments use their relationships with foreign forces to remain in power. These factors contribute to what Hendricks and Omenma term an 'opportunity structure' for violent extremism to thrive.

'More attention should be diverted to address the lack of human security and the governance and socioeconomic challenges in the Sahel,' they argue.

More like Mauritania?

A map of violent extremist groups across the Sahel has a notable clear space, bordering Mali to the west: Mauritania. Here, the government has managed to largely prevent violent extremism in recent years, despite its positioning. How has it achieved this?

Creating bridges for jihadist recruits to re-enter society may be an important step. In addition to overhauling its military – improving the living conditions of soldiers, increasing pay, and training – Mauritania has focused on addressing socioeconomic challenges. In remote areas of the desert – particularly along the southeast border – the government has prioritised infrastructure and development.

The government has also built channels of communication with members of extremist groups. The strategy includes an ideological dialogue component, while also recognising the socioeconomic and other factors that compel young people to join extremist groups. According to Hassane Koné and Ornella Moderan of the *Institute for Security Studies*, efforts to facilitate reintegration and to prevent radicalisation include vocational training for 'repentants' and students of Islamic schools (mahdharas) who might be targeted for recruitment.

As the influence of France – which has refused to negotiate with violent extremists – declines, the approach has gained favour in parts of the Sahel, despite its challenges. In February 2022, Niger's president, Mohamed Bazoum, announced that the government had released nine prisoners to initiate discussions with jihadists groups as part of 'the search for peace'. With the withdrawal of French troops, Mali may soon follow suit.

Co-ordinated approach

Some analysts suspect that the Mauritanian government has signed a mutual non-aggression pact with violent extremist groups – agreeing not to target their positions in exchange for Mauritania's exemption from attacks. The government has denied this. Such a pact, critics argue, would serve to undermine counter-terrorism attacks in the region. Koné and Moderan note that in some instances, fighters who returned to violence after engaging in dialogue in Mauritania did indeed move to neighbouring countries. They write: 'For Sahelian states, this means that talks with jihadists require a coordinated approach, to avoid a displacement effect that could shift the terrorism problem around the region.' The increase in violent extremism in other parts of Africa has led to a call for a continental approach to the problem.

Attempts to silence the guns with gunshot in the Sahel have not proved effective. As Hendricks and Omenma argue, 'these violent extremist groups are in a contest for power; therefore, they also have to be engaged at a political level.' Military engagement should be balanced with inclusive peacebuilding approaches that 'engage communities and violent extremists in dialogue and negotiations, respectively, and… produce transformed state-security relations.'

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