

Advancing U.S. Counterterrorism and Conflict Prevention in Sahel and Coastal West Africa for Mutual Security

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Abstract: This study examines the effectiveness of United States counterterrorism and conflict prevention initiatives in the Sahel and Coastal West Africa from 2001 to 2025. Drawing on a comprehensive review of peer-reviewed publications and official reports, it evaluates the extent to which these interventions have enhanced regional and U.S. security interests. Findings reveal that despite over two decades of sustained engagement through programs such as the Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership, AFRICOM operations, and the Global Fragility Act, terrorism in the Sahel has intensified rather than declined. The region now accounts for more than half of global terrorism-related deaths, with violence expanding southward into coastal states. While U.S. support has improved tactical coordination, intelligence sharing, and partner capacity, these gains have not translated into durable stability due to the dismantling of USAID, geopolitical competition, fragmented interagency coordination, and persistent governance as well as socio-economic problems. The analysis emphasizes that U.S. efforts remain operationally active but strategically inconclusive, constrained by weak institutional accountability and limited local ownership. It argues that mutual security between the U.S. and Africa requires a coherent, integrated approach linking defense, diplomacy, and development, emphasizing good governance and accountability. Sustainable stability in the Sahel and Coastal West Africa co-depends on both military superiority and locally grounded strategies that address the structural drivers of extremism.

Keywords: Counterterrorism, violent extremism, Sahel, Coastal West Africa, conflict prevention.

INTRODUCTION

The Sahel has become the epicenter of violent extremism and persistent insecurity in Africa. Once seen as peripheral to global terrorism, the Sahel, which stretches from Mauritania through Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, and Chad, now accounts for some of the world's fastest-growing terrorism-related deaths. The main countries in the Sahel plagued by terrorism include Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. In Mali, groups linked to Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) and Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) have carried out fatal attacks on both civilians and government forces (Bere, 2024). According to the Global Terrorism Index (GTI, 2024), the Sahel was responsible for nearly 50 percent of global terrorism fatalities in 2023. Burkina Faso is central to fatalities and now accounts for a disproportionate share of Sahelian deaths and displacement. Its insecurity has a huge effect on the regional conflict ecosystem, and without stabilizing Burkina Faso, regional security cannot be realistically achieved. The historical rise of terrorism and violent extremism in the Sahel and Coastal West Africa can be attributed to a combination of various structural and contextual factors. The collapse of the Libyan regime in 2011 flooded the region with arms and fighters, which transformed local rebellions into a conflagration that resulted in a conflict that continues in various forms to this day. (Clyde *et al.*, 2025). The

destruction of pastoral livelihoods also created fertile ground for recruitment (Thurston, 2020). Other root causes, such as poverty, corruption, exclusion, and injustice, were also prevalent. These factors together created a web of interconnected weaknesses where dangers cross national borders.

For much of the twentieth century, U.S. diplomatic engagement in the Sahel was limited, except for Nigeria. The Sahel has historically been seen as geopolitically and economically insignificant, receiving little focus outside humanitarian crises such as the 1980s droughts (Pham, 2020). However, the 9/11 terrorist attacks radically shifted U.S. foreign policy priorities. The U.S. launched a series of counterterrorism initiatives in the Sahel.

Most recently, the Global Fragility Act (GFA) of 2019 embodies a ten-year strategy to address the root causes of violence through partnerships with local communities. These evolving engagements indicate a shift in U.S. priorities from ordinary counterterrorism containment to mutual security. As local extremist groups are being connected to global terrorist networks, it has become clear that regional instability can impact U.S. interests through migration and organized crime. Security today is borderless. The migration of displaced people towards the West and North Africa, and the

use of the Sahel as a transit corridor for illicit trafficking, shows the connection in security between the two continents (Lukyanov & Nadzharov, 2025). Today, mutual security is not merely a diplomatic phrase but a strategic necessity.

Despite huge investments through the USAID and significant military investments in counterterrorism in the Sahel and Coastal West Africa, there is still instability in these areas. The persistence of violent extremism, the proliferation of factions, the spillover of insecurity into previously stable coastal states, and the recent alliance of such states with global rivals question the sustainability and effectiveness of the United States' counterterrorism initiatives.

At a scholarly level, several policy analyses of specific programs exist, but comprehensive reviews synthesizing empirical evidence on U.S. counterterrorism and conflict prevention in the Sahel and Coastal West Africa are rare. This study aims to address that gap in analysis and evidence.

The principal aim of this study is to assess U.S. counterterrorism and conflict prevention efforts in the Sahel and Coastal West Africa to determine their effectiveness, challenges, and prospects for advancing mutual security. Specifically, the objectives are to examine the nature and scope of U.S. engagement in counterterrorism and conflict prevention across these regions, examine the effectiveness of these interventions in enhancing both regional and U.S. security interests, and identify the key challenges, policy gaps, and opportunities for improvement.

This research contributes to the expanding knowledge on U.S.–Africa security cooperation by bringing together various studies into a single, evidence-based document. The study focuses exclusively on the United States' counterterrorism and conflict prevention engagements in the Sahel region and spillover effects on Coastal West Africa.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study uses a systematic review design to synthesize existing evidence on U.S. counterterrorism and conflict prevention initiatives in the Sahel and Coastal West Africa. A systematic review is a rigorous and transparent method that allows for the collection, evaluation, and amalgamation of available literature according to

predetermined criteria (Petticrew & Roberts, 2006).

The review process followed the structured set of procedures in line with the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines (Moher *et al.*, 2009).

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

To ensure the relevance and quality of the literature, peer-reviewed journal articles, book chapters, official U.S. government reports, and reputable think-tank publications were included if they were:

- Published between 2001 and 2025
- Addressed U.S. counterterrorism, conflict prevention, or security cooperation specifically within the Sahel or Coastal West Africa.

And excluded if they were:

- Focusing exclusively on other African regions, such as East Africa or North Africa
- Not in the English language.

Data Sources and Extraction Strategy

Data was gathered from a combination of databases, including JSTOR, Scopus, Google Scholar, and ProQuest. Grey literature such as U.S. government documents, USAID reports, AFRICOM reports, and think-tank analyses was retrieved from official websites and research portals only.

Keywords and Boolean search strings such as “U.S. counterterrorism Africa”, “United States Sahel security”, “West Africa conflict prevention”, “terrorism”, “Sahel extremism”, “violent extremism prevention U.S. policy”, “AFRICOM”, “U.S. Sahel engagement” guided the search process:

Each search result was screened for relevance by reading abstracts, executive summaries, and keywords.

Data analysis

Data extracted from selected sources were analyzed using a thematic approach. Quantitative data were descriptively and analytically compared to expose patterns in conflict intensity and socio-economic trends, while qualitative materials were coded according to recurring themes of effectiveness, challenges, and partnership models. Through iterative comparison, overlapping insights were merged into larger analytical groups that aligned with the objectives of the study. Triangulation across multiple reputable data sources enhanced validity, ensuring that emerging

themes accurately reflected the complex dynamics of the topic.

Limitations

Although systematic reviews offer methodological rigor, they also have limitations. Overlapping national boundaries and changing alliances make it difficult to isolate the effects of U.S. engagement from those of other actors such as France, the EU, or regional and local governments. This and other constraints, such as potential publication bias, limited access to classified operational data, are recognized and, through diligent efforts, addressed by thoroughly evaluating the context and objective of each study.

Ethical Considerations

Given the reliance of the study on secondary data from publicly available sources, and does not involve direct human participants or respondents, ethical considerations are minimal. However, the eligibility criteria and rationale for inclusion are transparently documented to reduce selection bias and enhance reliability.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

The key theories underpinning the analysis are the Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), Liberal Institutionalism, and Realism.

Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), developed by Buzan and Wæver (2003), posits that security dynamics are regionally clustered. The intensity of threats and responses is generally greater among neighboring states compared to those that are more distant. Applying RSCT can clarify how unrest in the Sahel affects Coastal West Africa and how external players such as the U.S. become involved in regional security dynamics through partnerships and military aid.

Liberal Institutionalism highlights the importance of institutions, cooperation, and interdependence in reaching collective security objectives (Keohane, 2011). In this context, U.S. involvement through initiatives like USAID programs, the Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership, and multilateral discussions can be interpreted as efforts to promote stability through cooperative institutions.

Conversely, Realism focuses on power and “selfish” national interest. It explains that the U.S. engagement is partially motivated by the need to uphold its influence in a region that is becoming more competitive due to the interests of other nations, such as Russia and China (Mearsheimer, 2001). This framework acknowledges that even

collaborative security efforts are shaped by considerations of national interests and geopolitical agendas.

These theories together provide a comprehensive perspective for examining U.S. counterterrorism activities. Their combined application allows the study to assess all aspects of the U.S and Africa engagements that are relevant to the study.

KEY FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Nature and Trends of Terrorism in the Sahel and Coastal West Africa

The trajectory of terrorism in the Sahel and Coastal West Africa over the past two decades reflects a slow transformation from localized rebellions to a transnational web of violent extremism. The Africa Center for Strategic Studies estimates roughly 11,200 deaths associated with militant Islamist groups in 2024 alone, representing an over 50 percent share of all such fatalities on the continent.

The earliest phase of militant activities in the Sahel was characterized by the remnants of North African jihadist movements relocating southward. These groups exploited porous borders and ungoverned spaces across Mali, Niger, and Mauritania, inserting themselves in illegal trade routes. Over time, local injustices intersected with global jihadist narratives, and a second phase began. This phase was marked by the consolidation of militant networks such as Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and later Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wa al-Muslimeen (JNIM). JNIM has since become the dominant actor, reportedly responsible for 64 percent of all Islamist militant-linked fatalities in the region (Eizenga & Williams, 2020).

This intensification produced a stark rise in lethality. The Sahel experienced an increase of over 2,000 percent in terrorism deaths between 2007 and 2022 (Arslan, 2023). The violence escalated and expanded southward into central Mali and across the tri-border area with Burkina Faso and Niger. Fatalities multiplied, villages were depopulated, and cross-border mobility of armed groups became normalized. By the mid-2020s, more than 21,000 people were killed in Burkina Faso, Mali, and the western part of Niger in 5,229 incidents (OECD, 2025). Recent analyses from the Global Terrorism Index confirm that Burkina Faso has become the world's most terrorism-affected country, accounting for nearly 25% of all global terrorism deaths in 2023,

underscoring its centrality to regional destabilization.

The African Centre for the Study and Research on Terrorism informs that militant groups established a stronger presence in the heart of the Sahel, and they are steadily encroaching on the coastal states. Militants strategically sought to exploit weak border governance and new recruitment environments. Benin, Togo, and Côte d'Ivoire started to see significant incursions and attacks along their northern borders. The expanding geography of violence has been accompanied by adaptive militant tactics. Reported incidents in these zones rose to 1,256 security incidents, including the use of improvised explosive devices (UNICEF, 2024). These changes show an insurgency that adapts and reorganizes faster than most state responses. The humanitarian toll increased along with the number of attacks, resulting in widespread displacement throughout the Liptako-Gourma region. Schools closed en masse, and local economies collapsed. By 2024, more than 2.5 million people were internally displaced in Burkina Faso and Mali alone (Africa Report, 2025).

Equally significant to understanding these trends is the role of external geopolitical actors in shaping conflict trajectories. In recent times, Russia's Wagner Group, which is rebranded as the "Africa Corps," has entrenched itself in Mali, Burkina Faso, and later Niger, providing regime-protection services that reshape local power balances while weakening Western counterterrorism influence (Watling & Wilén 2024). Their deployment has been linked to increased civilian casualties, human rights violations, and further destabilization, complicating U.S. and multilateral efforts (Jemlak & Momoh, 2025). However, Wagner and other associated Russian actors are likely to be drawn by mineral potential and strategic location. Its proximity to conflict zones in Niger makes it a valuable staging ground or partner for actors wanting influence in the Sahel (Eledinov & Lechner, 2023).

RSCT offers the most comprehensive lens for explaining the region's security interdependence. The spread of violence from the Sahel's core to the coastal states demonstrates how insecurity operates within a single regional system rather than isolated national arenas. The Realist ideology highlights how these external states' behavior aligns with personal preservation rather than selfless partnership. These trends illuminate a complex

security issue where the Sahel has evolved from being a fringe area of the global jihad to a self-sustaining theatre of insurgency with gravitational pull toward the coast.

Nature and Scope of U.S. Engagement in Counterterrorism and Conflict Prevention

The United States' engagement in the Sahel and Coastal West Africa has transitioned from hesitant military actions to a comprehensive agenda that combines defense, diplomacy, and development. Initially, U.S. strategic interest in the region was marginal and overshadowed by other theatres of global concern, yet as violent extremist groups expanded, Washington began to treat this area as a major threat. The institutionalization of the United States Africa Command (AFRICOM) in 2008 marked a significant commitment of resources to security in Africa.

The first substantial engagement was the TransSahara Counterterrorism Partnership (TSCTP), established in 2005 following its precursor, the Pan-Sahel Initiative. This program involved capacity-building for partner militaries and law enforcement across Mauritania, Mali, Niger, Chad, Nigeria, and Senegal, among others. The focus was on strengthening borders and preventing extremist infiltration. Over time, U.S. engagement broadened in scope. Beyond training and direct military assistance, the U.S. initiated the annual "Flintlock" exercise. For example, in 2024, around 1,300 military personnel from about thirty states participated under U.S. sponsorship and coordination (Amara, 2025). The U.S. Navy and Coast Guard joined efforts through the Africa Partnership Station, engaged in a maritime dimension to counterterrorism and prevention, which targeted illicit trafficking routes and secured the Gulf of Guinea (Nnamani, 2022).

The enactment of the Global Fragility Act in 2019 and associated strategies also illustrates a move from strict military operations toward "whole-of-government" methods merging development, governance, and security. Concurrently, AFRICOM leadership emphasized a renewed focus on burden-sharing, African-led security capacity, and protecting the U.S. homeland by stabilizing partner states' security.

However, the scope and influence of U.S. engagement have been significantly constrained by intensifying geopolitical competition. Following the termination of U.S. military basing rights in Niger in 2024, Sahelian juntas have increasingly

aligned with Russia's Africa Corps, whose security offerings prioritize regime survival over accountability (Mwungura, 2025). This shift has reduced U.S. access to intelligence, air surveillance corridors, and partner-force cooperation, thereby diminishing the strategic reach of U.S. counterterrorism operations.

Liberal Institutionalism illuminates U.S. efforts to institutionalize cooperation and interdependence through multilateral mechanisms like the Global Fragility Act, ECOWAS partnerships, and USAID's governance programs. These reflect an acknowledgement that collective security and institution-building are essential to long-term stabilization, but the extent of U.S. involvement shows a struggle between being cautious and the need to keep regional stability. This is why planning has often been thorough, but ongoing action has been limited.

Geographically, U.S. engagement in the Sahel and Coastal West Africa covers a wide range of operations: training of Malian rapid-reaction units, maritime security coordination off the Ghana-Côte d'Ivoire coast, civil-military programs in Benin and Togo and until 2024 drone and intelligence bases in Niger (Agadez). However, this engagement is not static: recent coup d'états in Niger and Mali have led to U.S. forces withdrawing or relocating, showing that U.S. commitment to combating terrorism in the Sahel is more fragile than it seems.

Effectiveness of Counterterrorism and Conflict Prevention Strategies

Evaluating the effectiveness of U.S. counterterrorism and conflict prevention efforts in the Sahel and Coastal West Africa requires examining measurable outputs, observed outcomes, and the extent to which stated objectives have materialized. U.S. strategies over the years have sought to degrade extremist groups, build partner capacity, and stabilize fragile states (Muzalevsky, 2017). Yet, despite more than two decades of sustained engagement and billions of dollars in assistance, empirical data reveal unequal and often disappointing results in reducing violence, improving local governance, or achieving sustainable security gains.

Quantitatively, conflict metrics suggest that U.S. engagement has coincided with a dramatic escalation of violence rather than its reduction. ACLED data show that organized political violence in the Sahel increased by over 35 percent

in 2020 alone, and fatalities multiplied between 2016 and 2023 (Detti, 2021). As of 2024, more than 10,000 people had been killed in terrorist incidents across the Sahel, representing over half of global terrorism-related deaths (Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2025). These increasing numbers indicate that, although U.S. initiatives have expanded partner militaries, they have not translated into a corresponding decline in terrorist activity. When normalized by population, the GTI numbers indicate that Mali recorded about twenty terrorism-related deaths per 100,000 inhabitants in 2024, compared to about two per 100,000 in Ghana, highlighting that violence remains geographically concentrated despite extensive regional programming.

A central metric of U.S. engagement, the building of effective, accountable security institutions, has also underperformed. The TSCTP and AFRICOM's "train-and-equip" missions aimed to strengthen local forces through tactical training and interoperability. By 2018, Mali alone had received US\$170 million in military aid, while total U.S. security assistance to the Sahel exceeded US\$1 billion (Detti, 2021). Yet the measurable outcomes were limited. The U.S. Department of State's Office of the Inspector General (OIG) audit in 2020 found that US\$201.6 million in TSCTP funds were at risk of waste due to inadequate monitoring, weak coordination, and the absence of measurable milestones (Detti, 2021). Furthermore, military training outcomes were compromised by governance shortfalls: the 2012 Malian coup was led by officers who had received U.S. military education, raising concerns about the long-term effects of assistance when institutional reform lags (Tankel, 2020).

From a performance standpoint, the operational linkages established under AFRICOM have achieved notable tactical successes but have not demonstrated durability. Joint exercises such as *Flintlock* have expanded multilateral coordination and intelligence-sharing among more than 30 partner nations, improving interoperability and logistics. Drone operations and intelligence bases in Niger have enhanced surveillance coverage, but their deterrent effect has been modest. Local forces also remain reliant on U.S. and French forces for planning, air support, and intelligence, which limits autonomous resilience once external actors withdraw.

Similarly, progress has been limited in tackling the socio-economic factors that support conflict

prevention. U.S. initiatives under the TSCTP and USAID aimed to combine youth employment, education, and governance reforms. However, the weakening of USAID's operational presence and institutional capacity has sharply reduced the U.S. government's ability to address socio-economic root causes of conflict, such as food insecurity, low education, and poor healthcare (Auwal *et al.*, 2025). Without USAID's governance and justice, the U.S. strategy has become increasingly unbalanced, reinforcing over-militarized approaches that have historically shown limited long-term effectiveness in the Sahel (Chappell, 2021).

The United Nations Development Programme found that 25 per cent of youth who were engaged in violent extremist groups were primarily attracted to join up as an "employment opportunity". Infrastructure and service delivery have not seen parallel improvements: over 418 million Africans still do not have access to basic drinking-water services (UNICEF, 2024), while populations affected by conflict in the Sahel endure some of the poorest humanitarian conditions worldwide. These ongoing deficiencies underscore that investments in counterterrorism have not successfully converted into benefits for human security.

In terms of budgetary and management effectiveness, oversight lapses have compromised value for money. The U.S. Air Base 201 in Agadez, Niger, built at a cost exceeding US\$100 million and requiring US\$30 million annually for maintenance, faced design and operational deficiencies documented by the U.S. Air Force Audit Agency (Detti, 2021). In Mali and Niger, fragmented donor coordination and duplication between U.S., French, and regional efforts reduced efficiency. These findings are consistent with GAO reports since 2008 that identified the absence of a comprehensive, integrated strategy for the TSCTP, leaving agencies to rely on documents drafted in 2005 (Detti, 2021). The result is an array of disjointed projects that seldom achieve synergistic outcomes.

At the governance level, U.S. assistance has struggled to foster accountability or human-rights compliance among partner militaries. Empirical documentation by Amnesty International (2020) and Human Rights Watch shows that between February and April 2020 alone, security forces in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso were responsible for at least 57 extrajudicial executions and 142

enforced disappearances, while the UN recorded over 600 unlawful killings in the same period (Detti, 2021). Such abuses fuel grievances and create the very recruitment environments extremist organizations exploit. These patterns indicate that performance metrics, which are based solely on the number of troops trained or operations conducted, mask underlying failures in other key aspects.

Despite these shortcomings, certain localized gains are observable. Coastal West African states have experienced limited spillover due to preventive border-security cooperation and early-warning mechanisms supported by the U.S. maritime initiatives. These states have avoided systemic collapse. Additionally, the Global Fragility Act (2019) represents a strategic pivot toward integrating governance and development. Early implementation pilots in coastal West Africa demonstrate a shift from reactive counterterrorism to proactive conflict prevention, though results remain preliminary.

The varied success of U.S. interventions shows the limits of externally driven security models in situations where local systems are weak. Technical success cannot make up for a lack of political efficiency. Even though there were measurable improvements in training and coordination, these did not lead to lasting results. The governance structures stayed the same, proving that tactical skills are not enough without institutional accountability. The entry of Russia's Africa Corps into Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger has further reduced the strategic space available to the U.S., as regimes increasingly prefer Russian support that demands fewer governance reforms (Lanaspá Tambo, 2025). This geopolitical displacement has directly weakened the U.S. ability to shape counterterrorism norms and support institutional reform.

On balance, quantitative data show escalating violence despite expanded assistance; qualitative evidence reveals weak local ownership and inconsistent program oversight. Tactical coordination and surveillance capacities have improved, but the inability to institutionalize reform or address socio-economic root causes has limited the sustainability.

Challenges and Weaknesses

A principal obstacle remains the absence of an integrated grand strategy guiding U.S. operations in the region. Since the early 2000s,

counterterrorism policies have progressed in an uncoordinated manner, with responsibilities split among the Department of Defense through AFRICOM, the Department of State via the Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership (TSCTP), and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) overseeing stabilization and governance initiatives (Hooper, 2012). Each agency has functioned under separate mandates and budget allocations, often lacking a unified framework for results. Both the Government Accountability Office (GAO) and the Department of State's Office of the Inspector General (OIG) have consistently pointed out this lack of coherence, indicating that even by 2020, inter-agency coordination relied on documents created in 2005 and did not have shared performance standards (Detti, 2021). As a result, this has led to repetitive efforts and inconsistent prioritization: while AFRICOM focused on tactical military engagement and building capacity, State and USAID aimed to promote governance and preventive measures that often fell behind military schedules. This fragmentation has caused a significant disconnect between immediate security needs and long-term stabilization goals, leading Tankel (2020) to describe it as "a collection of stovepiped programs rather than a coherent regional strategy." Without a cohesive grand strategy, U.S. involvement remains reactive, intensifying after crises but diminishing once political focus shifts, thus limiting its ability to prevent future issues. This fragmentation has been exploited by external actors, particularly Russia, whose model appeals to Sahelian juntas seeking security partnerships without governance conditionalities.

The second major constraint lies in governance, developmental, and socio-political gaps that persist despite significant aid flows. Local involvement in counterterrorism efforts has often been shallow, with national elites siphoning off donor funds to reinforce patronage networks instead of enhancing institutional development. Assessments conducted in Mali and Niger reveal that counterterrorism support is commonly perceived as a means for rent-seeking, intensifying competition among elites and fostering corruption (Detti, 2021). Community leaders, local governments, and civil-society organizations are seldom included in the planning or oversight of security initiatives, undermining legitimacy and accountability. As a result, donor-led models fail to tackle local grievances or build resilience within communities

(Zhu & Gao, 2024). These gaps have widened as USAID's institutional footprint has diminished, eroding the United States' capacity to advance governance reform, rule of law, or community resilience, which are the core elements essential for sustainable conflict prevention (Schwoebel *et al.*, 2004).

The persistence of structural drivers of extremism further compounds these governance deficits. Despite almost twenty years of global involvement, socio-economic metrics in the Sahel continue to be dire. These circumstances create a pool of recruits for violent extremist groups that take advantage of local grievances against both government entities and foreign influences. Additionally, the limited availability of state services in remote regions contributes to ongoing insecurity. Excluded pastoral communities and border populations find little distinction between being overlooked by central authorities and the presence of foreign military forces. Consequently, the developmental components of U.S. policy, meant to complement military support, have been insufficient in scale and too disjointed to bring about significant socio-economic improvements. Without inclusive governance and fair development, counterterrorism efforts only tackle superficial issues rather than addressing the fundamental causes.

A third challenge is the over-militarization of assistance, which has distorted U.S. involvement towards military operations while neglecting civilian oversight, justice-sector reform, and political reconciliation. The TSCTP's rationale of training elite units as a "critical, though limited" response to local Al-Qaeda factions focused operational readiness as the primary indicator of success (Tankel, 2020). This focus was justifiable considering U.S. fiscal and political limitations, but resulted in a skewed security framework in partner nations: well-equipped special forces in capital cities existing alongside overlooked local police and judicial institutions. U.S. officials frequently portrayed the training strategy as the most economical way to maintain a counterterrorism presence without becoming deeply involved, yet this strategy inadvertently solidified military control in governance. The unintended consequences have been significant. Multiple coups in the region were executed by officers who had received U.S. military education or training, notably in Mali (2012) and Niger (2023), prompting challenging questions regarding the long-term effects of security aid that lacks a

focus on building democratic institutions (Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2025). An excessive dependence on military partnerships has also restricted funding for civilian oversight organizations, justice reforms, and deradicalization initiatives that could enhance military accomplishments. In reality, this imbalance has strengthened the perception that the United States prioritizes security over governance, weakening local legitimacy and creating a persistent divide between tactical achievements and strategic stabilization. Unless future U.S. approaches integrate these dimensions into a coherent and locally grounded framework, effectiveness will remain partial and reversible (Zhu & Gao, 2024).

The existence of these disparities demonstrates a structural resistance within both U.S. and partner organizations. By favoring measurable results, the existing policy frameworks have inadvertently strengthened the very weaknesses they seek to address.

Mutual Security Implications

The interdependence between U.S. and African security has become increasingly evident as instability in the Sahel continues to spill into Coastal West Africa. The idea of mutual security emphasizes that regional threats can no longer be contained within specific geographical boundaries: extremist organizations, illegal trafficking, and humanitarian emergencies create feedback loops that impact both African and U.S. strategic interests. In this framework, terrorism in the Sahel is not merely a local governance issue but also poses a systemic challenge to global security frameworks.

Empirical data highlights the magnitude and extent of this threat. Currently, the Sahel is responsible for over half of all global deaths related to terrorism, with Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger being the focal points (Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2025). The nature of violence is increasingly transnational; attacks once limited to central Mali have spread towards the Gulf of Guinea. Findings from the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (2024) indicate that Benin and Togo saw a fivefold rise in cross-border incidents from 2021 to 2023, demonstrating the weakening of traditional security barriers. This escalation has immediate consequences for maritime commerce, foreign investment, and migration management, which are all key aspects of U.S. strategic and economic interests in West Africa (OECD, 2025).

For Washington, the instability in the Sahel illustrates a merging of counterterrorism and global governance priorities. Unchecked violence threatens to create areas lacking governance, which could harbor transnational jihadi groups and criminal enterprises with the potential for global impact. From a Realist view, U.S. behavior aligns with the ideology of power projection and interest preservation rather than selfless partnership. Early engagement under the Pan-Sahel Initiative and subsequent programs like TSCTP and AFRICOM reflected an attempt to prevent the emergence of ungoverned spaces that could threaten U.S. homeland or global assets, while minimizing direct entanglement.

Mutual security is also contingent on perception and trust. Although U.S. policymakers are increasingly emphasizing Africa's strategic importance, data published by Buchanan-Clarke and Lekalake in the Afrobarometer in 2016 shows ongoing public skepticism regarding foreign military presence and its intentions. African populations often view counterterrorism initiatives in terms of sovereignty and economic prospects rather than as efforts to mitigate global threats, leading to mismatched expectations. If these perceptual and policy divides are not addressed, partnerships risk perpetuating dependency instead of fostering shared stability.

The security of the U.S. and Africa is now fundamentally linked through migration and foreign investments, and the instability of the Sahel and coastal nations does not benefit any of the involved countries. For the United States, achieving stability in West Africa is essential for maintaining geopolitical equilibrium; for African nations, a productive partnership with Washington provides leverage and capability. Nonetheless, mutual security transforms aligned interests into a genuinely collective security framework. The synthesis points to this essential paradox lies in the fact that America's pursuit of stability through minimal involvement has perpetuated instability that now directly affects its own interests.

The concept of mutual security arises not just from a shared sense of vulnerability but also serves as a measure of whether unequal partners can change dependence into interdependence through effective cooperation. The situation in the Sahel proves that the stability of one country is increasingly reliant on the governance strength of the other, rendering mutual security not merely a goal but a necessity for both Africa and the United States.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The United States ought to implement a unified and regionally consistent strategy that merges security, governance, and development aims under a cohesive interagency framework. Instead of maintaining separate pathways between the Department of Defense, State Department, and USAID, a collaborative coordination mechanism should be established to ensure that military support, diplomatic efforts, and development initiatives complement each other. This change is administratively possible within current structures, referring to the interagency model of the Global Fragility Act, while minimizing redundancy, enhancing accountability, and aligning immediate security measures with long-term stabilization objectives.

Both U.S. and African partners should adjust their assistance strategies to focus more on governance and accountability at the grassroots level rather than merely increasing military training. Allocating a modest portion of existing counterterrorism funds towards local institutions, for instance, community-based policing, judicial systems, and anti-corruption initiatives, would increase civilian oversight without necessitating new financial commitments. By grounding external support in domestic governance reforms, U.S. cooperation would contribute to addressing the underlying issues that fuel extremism and highlight a sincere dedication to mutual security.

CONCLUSION

This study finds that despite sustained U.S. engagement since 2001, terrorism and violent extremism in the Sahel and Coastal West Africa have expanded in both scale and complexity. The Sahel now accounts for more than half of global terrorism-related deaths, with Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger forming the epicenter of such fatalities. Violence has progressively spilled southward into some regions in Benin and Togo. These patterns confirm that regional insecurity is linked to and driven by a combination of weak governance, socio-economic hardships, and cross-border militant mobility. The deterioration has been most dramatic in Burkina Faso, which now records the highest terrorism-related deaths globally, making the stabilization of this single state indispensable to any credible U.S. counterterrorism posture in the region.

The U.S. response, which is evident in programs like the Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership (TSCTP), AFRICOM operations, and the Global

Fragility Act, has demonstrated commitment but yielded limited success. Although improvements have been made in tactical coordination, intelligence sharing, and partner training, these improvements have not led to sustainable stability. Fatalities and displacement continue to rise, and extremist groups remain adaptive and resilient. U.S. aid has primarily focused on military and technical support instead of offering thorough governance or development reforms, leading to inconsistent and temporary effects. The effectiveness of U.S. engagement has been further constrained by intensified geopolitical competition in the form of the growing presence of Russia's Africa Corps, which has reshaped regional alliances and reduced U.S. leverage.

Three persistent weaknesses contribute to these outcomes. First, the absence of a cohesive grand strategy has led to fragmented efforts among U.S. agencies and partner states. Second, governance and developmental issues, such as corruption and persistent youth unemployment, have weakened local ownership and legitimacy. Third, the excessive focus on militarization of assistance has strengthened security forces without parallel progress in justice or civic resilience, occasionally leading to coups and abuses by U.S.-trained personnel. These challenges have been compounded by the restructuring and diminution of USAID, which historically served as the primary U.S. instrument for governance reform.

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