

## **Unchecked Violence in Central Sahel**

A spike in jihadist violence has made the Central Sahel, including Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger, the latest terrorist hotspot. Military coups have created instability, leaving power vacuums that extremist organizations like IS Sahel and Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) have exploited to expand their influence. This has resulted in unprecedented civilian killings and extensive displacement, raising concerns about the spread of jihadist movements.

12,000 people, predominantly civilians, have lost their lives due to this violence. Burkina Faso has been the most affected with over 8,000 fatalities. Niger, which once played a significant role in counterterrorism, has seen a rise in insurgent attacks following the July 2023 coup. Fighting has spread from northern Mali into Niger, resulting in several military and civilian deaths.

With over 2.8 million internally displaced people (IDPs), including over 2.1 million in Burkina Faso alone, the humanitarian crisis in the region is severe. UN estimates indicate that official government control does not extend over half of Burkina Faso, leaving civilians vulnerable to abuses by both state and terrorist groups. The withdrawal of international peacekeeping forces, such as the UN operation MINUSMA from Mali, has created a gap in the protection of civilians and oversight of human rights.

The juntas ruling Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger have formed a mutual defense pact and withdrawn from regional organizations like the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), further isolating themselves from international support. This move has limited the prospects for regional stability. The entry of Russian mercenaries from the Wagner Group has intensified the conflict, particularly in Mali, where they have been implicated in numerous war crimes, including summary executions and torture.

The instability presents a high-risk environment for businesses looking to operate in the resource-rich Sahel. The militarized approach of the ruling juntas, combined with ongoing inter-communal tensions and increased use of aerial weapons, heightens the risk of violence.

The potential transformation of these regions into jihadist strongholds poses severe threats to both regional and global security. The international community must reassess its strategies and engage with regional players and organizations to prevent further escalation and mitigate risks for businesses and communities alike.