



InterRegional Dialogues

Sahel Threats

The UAE's Role in Addressing
Terrorist Threats in West Africa



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Sahel Threats:

The UAE's Role in Addressing Terrorist Threats in West Africa

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InterRegional for Strategic Analysis, in cooperation with the Sahel Academy for Peace and Security Studies in Mali, convened a closed roundtable discussion entitled "Sahel Threats: The UAE's Role in Addressing Terrorist Threats in West Africa" on 16 June 2026. The event was held as part of efforts to advance the research partnership between the two institutions and to facilitate an expert dialogue on the evolving security, political, and development dynamics in the Sahel and their implications for the security of West Africa and broader regional stability.

The discussion was guided by a central question: how should terrorist threats in the Sahel be understood, given that they are a multidimensional phenomenon shaped by state fragility, organized crime, international competition, and development challenges? It also explored the role of the United Arab Emirates as a partner in promoting security, stability, and sustainable development across West Africa.

InterRegional Dialogues is an occasional publication series issued by InterRegional for Strategic Analysis in cooperation with its partner think tanks and institutions. It highlights the key insights and perspectives shared by participants during joint roundtable discussions and events on priority regional and international issues. The series aims to provide in-depth analysis of current developments, assess their potential trajectories, and contribute to informed public debate on these issues.

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About InterRegional

InterRegional for Strategic Analysis, a multi-tasking general consulting firm, founded on 20 January 2021 in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates. It interacts with “public sphere” activities in parts of the world that affect the region, supports policy formation and decision-making processes. The firm’s executive organization includes a board of advisors and a board of directors that supervises several entities including a think tank that monitors and analyzes strategic developments. This is in addition to a project management department that implements the firm’s contracts both at home and abroad, and representative offices that work to strengthen scientific and practical cooperation and the exchange of ideas with scholarly actors in the main regions of the world.



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Executive Summary

As recent developments indicate, the terrorist threat in the Sahel has evolved beyond a localized insurgency into a complex regional crisis shaped by the interplay of multiple factors, including state fragility, weak governance, underdevelopment, organized crime, and shifting international partnerships. Since the outbreak of the Mali crisis in 2012, violence has spread from northern Mali into central Mali before expanding into Burkina Faso and western Niger, and it is now starting to spill over into the Gulf of Guinea states. This expansion has been enabled by porous borders, institutional vacuums, smuggling networks, local conflicts, and declining trust between communities and state institutions.

These developments further illustrate how terrorist groups no longer rely solely on armed attacks, but rather increasingly seek to establish local influence by presenting themselves, in some cases, as alternative providers of security, justice, or economic opportunities. At the same time, organized crime has become a critical enabler of the terrorist threat, with the trafficking of weapons, fuel, gold, people, and narcotics providing armed groups with essential sources of financing, mobility, and logistical support. Weak governance further exacerbates the crisis, as inadequate public services, corruption, unemployment, and competition over natural resources drive segments of the youth toward the economy of violence, motivated more by socioeconomic incentives than by ideological convictions.

Meanwhile, the changing landscape of external partnerships—marked by the decline of French and broader Western influence alongside the growing roles of Russia and Türkiye—has not fundamentally altered the nature of the crisis. Conventional security approaches remain insufficient unless accompanied by comprehensive security sector reform, confidence-building measures, sustainable development, and efforts to dismantle illicit financing networks. Within this context, the UAE's role stands out as a balanced model that combines counterterrorism support with development assistance, humanitarian engagement, and strategic partnerships. It is an approach that responds to the Sahel's need for partners that bolster security while also addressing development challenges and supporting local communities.

Ultimately, the future of security in the Sahel will depend on adopting a comprehensive approach that integrates counterterrorism with governance reform, sustainable development, and regional and international cooperation. Such an approach must move beyond confronting armed groups to addressing the underlying conditions that enable their emergence and persistence. The UAE's approach derives its significance from its ability to advance this vision by linking security with stability, development, and local resilience, thereby enhancing the prospects for sustainable, long-term solutions that strengthen state institutions, reduce communities' vulnerability to extremist infiltration, and curb the spread of terrorism and organized crime across West Africa.

I. The Evolving Terrorist Threat in the Sahel

Over the past decade, the terrorist threat in the Sahel has undergone significant transformation, evolving from a crisis concentrated in northern Mali into a broad regional challenge intertwined with organized crime, porous borders, weak governance, and the declining effectiveness of traditional security frameworks. This evolution demonstrates that terrorist groups no longer operate according to a fixed model; rather, they have become increasingly adaptive, expanding their reach by exploiting institutional and societal fragilities across the Sahel and West Africa.

1. The Shift of the Crisis from Northern Mali to the Central Sahel

The turning point in the expansion of terrorist threats across the Sahel began with the outbreak of the 2012 Mali crisis, when armed groups seized major northern cities, including Timbuktu, Gao, and Kidal. The threat subsequently spread into central Mali before expanding further into Burkina Faso and western Niger. This geographic shift reflects the ability of terrorist groups to withstand initial military operations and relocate to areas characterized by greater security and institutional vulnerabilities, particularly within the tri-border region linking Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger.

2. The Spread of Terrorist Threats toward the Gulf of Guinea States

The activities of terrorist organizations are no longer confined to the Central Sahel, as these groups have increasingly sought to expand toward the Gulf of Guinea states, particularly Benin, Togo, and Côte d'Ivoire, amid growing concerns that the threat could extend to other coastal West African states, including Ghana.” This development underscores the growing risk that terrorism could spread from traditionally fragile states into coastal countries that are more closely integrated into West Africa’s trade networks, ports, and economic corridors, thereby transforming the threat into a broader regional security challenge that extends beyond the Sahel’s desert and semi-desert zones.

3. The Proliferation of Terrorist Groups and Overlapping Areas of Operation

The terrorist landscape in the Sahel has become increasingly complex due to the growing number of active organizations and the overlap of their operational areas. Jama’at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin operates across Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, while extending its influence into parts of the Gulf of Guinea. Meanwhile, Islamic State in the Sahel remains active in eastern Mali and western Niger, and Islamic State West Africa Province continues its operations across

the Lake Chad Basin. The coexistence of these organizations complicates counterterrorism efforts, as each possesses distinct local networks, financing mechanisms, recruitment strategies, and operational patterns.

4. The Transformation of Terrorist Groups into Flexible Networks

Terrorist organizations in the Sahel no longer operate solely through centralized command structures or fixed territorial control. Instead, they have evolved into flexible networks that rely on local cells, tactical alliances, and decentralized field commanders capable of adapting their decisions to local conditions. This model enables armed groups to absorb security pressure more effectively, move rapidly between operational areas, and blend into local communities, making them considerably more difficult to defeat through conventional military operations than traditional organizations with clearly defined hierarchies and fixed bases.

5. The Exploitation of Technology for Recruitment, Surveillance, and Propaganda

Technological advances have introduced a new dimension to the terrorist threat in the Sahel. Armed groups increasingly rely on social media platforms and encrypted communication applications for coordination and recruitment, while employing commercially available drones for reconnaissance and monitoring security force movements. They also utilize digital propaganda in local languages to strengthen their influence within peripheral communities. These developments demonstrate that terrorism in the Sahel is no longer a low-technology phenomenon but has become increasingly capable of integrating digital and tactical tools to enhance its reach, influence, and operational flexibility.

6. The Nexus between Terrorism, Local Conflicts, and Institutional Vacuums

Terrorist groups have benefited from the limited presence of the state in remote areas and local disputes over land, water, and grazing resources, as well as declining public trust in official institutions. Within this environment, armed groups do not merely function as agents of violence; in some cases, they position themselves as providers of dispute resolution, protectors of trade routes, or enforcers of alternative local governance arrangements, thereby acquiring social influence that extends beyond their military capabilities. In this way, the evolution of terrorism in the Sahel reflects not only organizational adaptation but also a broader crisis of state capacity, governance, and development that enables these groups to regenerate and sustain their presence.

II. The Implications of Organized Crime and the Illicit Economy

Organized crime represents one of the principal factors enabling terrorist groups in the Sahel to survive and adapt despite sustained security pressure. Terrorism in the region is driven not only by ideological support networks or porous borders, but also by an illicit economy that provides financing, mobility, logistics, and the means to secure local loyalties. As a result, the relationship between terrorism and organized crime has become a structural component of the crisis rather than merely a facilitating factor.

1. Organized Crime as a Primary Source of Terrorist Financing

Terrorist groups in the Sahel rely on a diverse range of revenue streams linked to the illicit economy, including the trafficking of gold, fuel, weapons, narcotics, and people, as well as the collection of taxes and extortion fees along transportation routes and in local markets. The diversity of these revenue sources enables armed groups to offset operational losses, finance their activities, and recruit new members. Consequently, targeting terrorist operatives alone is unlikely to be sufficient, so long as illicit financing and trafficking networks remain intact.

2. The Exploitation of Gold and Natural Resources to Finance Violence

Gold—particularly from informal and artisanal mining areas—has become one of the most significant natural resources exploited by armed groups in the Sahel. Its ease of transportation, conversion into cash, and the limited oversight of extraction sites enable terrorist organizations to impose taxes and protection fees, control segments of smuggling routes, or provide security for illicit mining operations. In this way, a valuable local economic resource is transformed into a key source of financing that sustains violence and prolongs conflict.

3. The Use of Smuggling Networks for Mobility and Logistics

The benefits terrorist groups derive from smuggling networks extend well beyond financial gain. These networks also facilitate cross-border mobility and logistical support. “Terrorist groups benefit to varying degrees from illicit economies and smuggling networks, whether through the imposition of levies and taxes, the securing of transit routes, or the use of existing logistical and commercial networks. This does not necessarily imply that they exercise direct control over all forms of illicit trafficking.” This demonstrates that the Sahel’s vast and open geography becomes particularly vulnerable when combined with deeply entrenched transnational smuggling networks.

4. The Development of Mutually Beneficial Ties between Terrorist Groups and Criminal Networks

The relationship between terrorist organizations and organized criminal networks is based primarily on mutual interests rather than full organizational integration. Criminal networks seek protection and free passage through areas where state authority is weak, while terrorist groups depend on these networks for financing, logistics, and mobility. This mutually beneficial relationship creates an interdependence that makes dismantling organized crime an essential component of any effective counterterrorism strategy, rather than relying solely on military operations against armed groups.

5. The Impact of the Illicit Economy on State Authority

The expansion of the illicit economy weakens the state from within in various ways: it creates alternative centers of influence, fuels corruption, undermines public confidence in state institutions, and encourages segments of the population to rely on informal or illegal economic activities as their primary source of livelihood. Such an environment allows terrorist groups to increasingly present themselves as protectors, mediators, or regulators of certain local activities, thereby acquiring social and economic influence that extends well beyond their capacity for armed violence.

6. The Challenge of Combating Organized Crime Amid a Lack of Economic Alternatives

Although dismantling organized criminal networks is an essential part of the solution, efforts to combat the illicit economy through security measures alone may backfire if they are not accompanied by viable livelihood alternatives for local communities. Many peripheral communities across the Sahel depend on informal trade, artisanal mining, or cross-border commerce because of limited employment opportunities and inadequate public services. Consequently, efforts to disrupt terrorist financing must be complemented by development policies that create legitimate sources of income, integrate vulnerable regions into the formal economy, and reduce local dependence on smuggling networks and armed groups.

III. Fragile Governance and the Local Recruitment Environment

Fragile governance constitutes one of the structural factors underpinning the expansion of terrorism across the Sahel. Armed groups do not operate solely within security vacuums; they also exploit weak state institutions, inadequate

public services, widespread corruption, and declining trust between citizens and the state. For this reason, addressing terrorism in the Sahel requires more than just pursuing armed groups: it also necessitates re-establishing an effective, equitable, and sustainable state presence in peripheral regions.

1. The Declining Presence of Governments in Peripheral Areas

Large parts of the Sahel suffer from a limited state presence, particularly in border regions and remote rural areas far from major urban centers. This institutional vacuum creates opportunities for terrorist groups to expand their influence. In the absence of effective policing, judicial institutions, public services, and local administration, armed groups are increasingly able to portray themselves as alternative authorities by providing security, mediating disputes, or controlling trade routes, thereby strengthening their influence within local communities.

2. Weak Public Services as a Driver of Radicalization

The lack of essential public services—including education, healthcare, justice, and infrastructure—deepens feelings of marginalization and increases the vulnerability of local communities to infiltration by armed groups. When citizens are unable to access state services, terrorist organizations exploit this vacuum by expanding their social influence, offering promises of protection or income, or presenting themselves as alternatives to formal state institutions. This dynamic creates an environment more conducive to recruitment and radicalization.

3. Corruption and the Erosion of Public Trust in the State

Corruption not only undermines the effectiveness of public institutions but also erodes the state's legitimacy in the eyes of citizens, particularly in communities that perceive themselves as excluded from resources and economic opportunities. As the state increasingly becomes perceived as negligent, corrupt, or biased, terrorist groups gain greater opportunities to exploit narratives of injustice, portraying themselves as forces capable of punishing corrupt officials or defending marginalized populations—even through coercion and violence.

4. The Exploitation of Unemployment to Recruit Youth

Unemployment and lack of economic opportunity are some of the principal drivers of recruitment across the Sahel, particularly among young people in rural and border communities. Terrorist organizations do not rely exclusively on ideological narratives; they often offer income, protection, or social status to potential recruits, making recruitment in many cases more closely linked to economic necessity than ideological conviction. Accordingly, creating

sustainable employment opportunities for young people should be regarded as an integral component of counterterrorism rather than merely a separate development objective.

5. The Exploitation of Local Resource Conflicts

Terrorist groups capitalize on disputes between pastoralists and farmers, as well as conflicts over land, water, and grazing resources, to expand their influence within local communities. They may support one party against another, position themselves as mediators, or exploit perceptions of injustice among certain groups to recruit new members. As a result, local social and economic disputes are increasingly transformed into persistent sources of violence and extremism, further complicating the security environment across the Sahel.

6. Coups and Political Instability

Military coups and recurrent political crises across the Sahel have heightened the fragility of the regional security environment by shifting government priorities toward political survival and immediate security concerns, while weakening long-term efforts to strengthen governance and promote sustainable development. These developments have also strained relations with some regional and international partners and reshaped existing security frameworks, creating opportunities for terrorist organizations to exploit periods of political transition to expand their operations.

7. Rebuilding the Relationship between the State and Society

The Sahel crisis demonstrates that counterterrorism efforts are unlikely to succeed without restoring trust between the state and local communities, particularly in peripheral regions. Achieving this will require improved public services, stronger governance, greater economic opportunities for young people, and security practices that inspire public trust rather than exacerbate grievances or fuel cycles of retaliation. As the state becomes more visible, accountable, and effective, armed groups lose the ability to present themselves as alternative authorities or intermediaries within local communities.

IV. International Competition and the Reshaping of the Sahel's Security Landscape

International competition has become a defining factor shaping the trajectory of security and stability in the Sahel. The crisis is no longer just a confrontation between regional governments and terrorist organizations; it has increasingly become intertwined with the reconfiguration of external influence following the

decline of French and broader Western engagement and the growing role of powers such as Russia and Türkiye. This shift demonstrates that the region's security landscape is determined not only by the capabilities of national armed forces themselves, but also by the nature of external partnerships and broader geopolitical dynamics. In this context, it is crucial for Sahelian states to be able to navigate these relationships with international partners and not allow strategic competition among them to exacerbate the crisis.

1. The Decline of Traditional French and Western Influence

The Sahel has witnessed a marked decline in French and broader Western influence following years of military and security engagement that failed to deliver lasting stability or halt the expansion of terrorist organizations. Persistent violence, growing domestic criticism of foreign military deployments, and the rise of sovereignty-driven political narratives have contributed to the withdrawal or reduction of the French military presence in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, alongside the scaling back of certain European and U.S. missions. This development reflects a broader crisis of confidence in traditional Western approaches rather than a diminished need for external support.

2. Russia's Emergence as an Alternative Security Partner

Capitalizing on the decline of Western influence and the desire of several Sahelian governments to diversify their security partnerships, Russia has presented itself as an alternative partner capable of supporting transitional governments in confronting terrorism and insurgency without the political strings often attached to Western assistance. The Russian approach has relied heavily on direct security support, private military companies, military cooperation, and diplomatic backing in international forums. Nevertheless, Russia's growing presence has not fundamentally altered the region's security landscape, as the persistence of terrorist threats demonstrates that replacing one external partner with another is insufficient to address the underlying drivers of the crisis, which include other factors such as weak governance, development challenges, and limited public trust.

3. The Expansion of Türkiye's Security and Defense Role

Türkiye has emerged as an increasingly important actor in the Sahel and West Africa through military cooperation agreements, defense exports, training initiatives, and an expanding diplomatic and economic presence. Ankara presents itself as a non-Western partner unburdened by the region's colonial legacy and capable of responding to the practical security requirements of

regional governments. Despite its growing role, however, Türkiye's contribution remains subject to the same limitations affecting conventional security-oriented approaches. While military cooperation may enhance the capabilities of national armed forces, it cannot by itself address deficiencies in public service delivery, resolve local conflicts, or dismantle the organized criminal networks that sustain terrorist organizations.

4. The Declining Effectiveness of Traditional Regional and International Frameworks

The intensification of international competition has coincided with the declining effectiveness of several frameworks that previously formed the backbone of regional security efforts, including the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali, the G5 Sahel, and aspects of the roles played by Economic Community of West African States and the African Union. These mechanisms have faced persistent challenges stemming from funding constraints, limited operational capabilities, political transitions, declining consensus among member states, and an insufficient capacity to respond rapidly to transnational threats. Consequently, the region's challenges are driven not only by changing external partnerships, but also by the weakening of regional institutions responsible for coordinating collective responses.

5. The Emergence of the Alliance and Confederation of Sahel States as an Alternative Framework

The Alliance of Sahel States was established by Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger as an effort to develop an alternative regional framework based on political and security solidarity in confronting terrorism and external pressures. The alliance reflects the determination of the Central Sahel states to assume greater ownership of regional security, coordinate military operations, harmonize diplomatic positions, and develop more autonomous financing mechanisms. Nevertheless, the alliance remains in an early stage of development and continues to face significant challenges related to resource constraints, military capabilities, institutional coordination, and maintaining constructive engagement with broader African regional frameworks. "The three states—Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger—transformed the Alliance of Sahel States into the Confederation of Sahel States in July 2024, while their formal withdrawal from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) took effect on 29 January 2025."

6. The Sahel as an Arena of Geopolitical Competition

The growing number of external partners provides Sahelian states with greater opportunities to diversify their sources of support, but it also increases the risk that the region will turn into an arena for geopolitical competition among international and regional powers. If geopolitical calculations end up taking precedence over coordination, this could result in overlapping initiatives, conflicting priorities, and weakened collective action against terrorism and organized crime. In such a scenario, where fragmented partnerships and competing external agendas prevail over a coordinated approach to security and development, it is the terrorist organizations that will emerge as the real winners.

7. The Need for Balanced Partnerships with External Powers

The evolving security landscape in the Sahel underscores that the objective should not be to replace one set of external partners with another, but rather to establish balanced partnerships that advance the priorities of the region and its societies. Sustainable security cannot be achieved through military assistance alone; instead, it requires a carefully diversified network of partnerships, effective regional coordination, and an integrated approach that links security with development, governance, and institution-building. Within this context, partners capable of combining counterterrorism cooperation with development assistance and humanitarian engagement are particularly well positioned to support practical solutions while reducing the risk of the Sahel becoming an open arena for geopolitical rivalry.

V. The Limits of Conventional Security Policies

The Sahel's experience over the past decade has demonstrated that conventional security policies are no longer sufficient to contain terrorist threats or prevent their expansion. While military operations, security assistance, peacekeeping missions, and regional cooperation frameworks remain important, the crisis has proven to be far more complex than just a security challenge, as it is rooted in state fragility, organized criminal networks, poverty, unemployment, and declining trust between communities and public institutions. Therefore, any strategy that fails to integrate security, development, and governance is likely to achieve only temporary containment rather than address the underlying conditions that sustain terrorism.

1. The Failure of Military Interventions to Deliver Sustainable Stability

Military interventions have, in some instances, prevented the collapse of vulnerable areas and temporarily weakened the operational capabilities of armed groups. However, they have not succeeded in producing long-term stability. French-led operations and broader Western security efforts managed to contain specific threats during certain periods, yet violence subsequently spread from northern Mali into central Mali before expanding to Burkina Faso, Niger, and the Gulf of Guinea states. This trajectory demonstrates that tactical military success does not automatically translate into political or societal stability unless accompanied by institution-building, improved public service delivery, and measures to address the root causes of recruitment and terrorist financing.

2. The Limited Impact of Training and Capacity-Building Missions

Several international initiatives have focused on training military and security forces, providing technical and intelligence support, and strengthening the capacities of security institutions. However, these efforts have been constrained by political instability, fluctuating confidence in external partners, changes in government, and sensitivities surrounding foreign military involvement. Moreover, training alone cannot deliver lasting results unless accompanied by comprehensive security sector reform, stronger relationships between security forces and local communities, enhanced professionalism, and effective civilian protection. Misconduct by security forces or operational mistakes can undermine public confidence and encourage local populations to remain passive or even cooperate with armed groups out of necessity.

3. The Declining Effectiveness of UN and Regional Frameworks

The experience of the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali, the G5 Sahel, and some aspects of the role played by the Economic Community of West African States and the African Union has highlighted the limitations of regional and international mechanisms in responding to a crisis of exceptional complexity. These frameworks have faced persistent challenges, including inadequate funding, limited logistical capacity, the vast geographical scope of operations, political transitions, and diminishing consensus among member states. In addition, the withdrawal of some countries from traditional regional arrangements has created strategic and geographic gaps that have weakened regional coordination against transnational terrorist threats.

4. Reducing Terrorism to Its Military Dimension

One of the principal shortcomings of conventional approaches has been the tendency to treat terrorism primarily as a military threat. The experience of the Sahel demonstrates, however, that terrorism is equally a crisis of governance and development, since terrorist organizations are able to exploit factors such as weak state institutions, deteriorating public services, unemployment, local conflicts, and illicit trafficking networks. Consequently, targeting armed operatives alone is insufficient, so long as the conditions that facilitate recruitment and financing remain intact. Military operations may temporarily suppress terrorist activity, but they will not succeed in eliminating it entirely unless they also address the underlying drivers of terrorism, such as poverty, marginalization, weak governance, and the erosion of public trust.

5. A Counterterrorism Strategy that Fails to Dismantle the “Economy of Violence”

Some security approaches have not adequately addressed the close relationship between terrorism and organized crime, even though networks trafficking illicit gold, fuel, weapons, narcotics, and people provide terrorist groups with essential financing, mobility, and logistical support. Counterterrorism operations that are not accompanied by efforts to disrupt smuggling routes, regulate informal mining activities, eliminate extortion systems, and combat money laundering are therefore likely to produce only limited and temporary effects. Terrorist organizations sustained by parallel illicit economies are often able to rebuild their capabilities even after suffering significant battlefield losses, increasing the risk of renewed violence following security operations.

6. Weak Integration of Security, Development, and Reconciliation

Security cannot be separated from development and community reconciliation, as violence across the Sahel is sustained by local conflicts, limited economic opportunities, inadequate public services, and weakened trust between citizens and the state. The most effective policies are therefore those that combine counterterrorism with local development initiatives, improvements in education and employment opportunities, public administration reform, and the peaceful resolution of disputes over natural resources. Participants in the roundtable emphasized the importance of moving beyond a purely military approach toward comprehensive strategies based on social inclusion, sustainable development, security sector reform, and the protection of civilians.

7. The Need for Multilateral International Partnerships in Security Governance

The limitations of conventional approaches indicate that, while Sahelian states do require external support, they also must take the lead in defining their own security and development priorities. Military and technical assistance designed without sufficient consideration of local realities risks losing legitimacy and becoming a source of additional tension. Accordingly, relationships with external partners must move beyond dependency toward a partnership model grounded in mutual interests. This requires strengthening African regional cooperation, supporting governments as well as local communities, and integrating capacity-building initiatives with high-impact development projects and community reconciliation efforts.

VI. The UAE's Policies for Promoting Stability and Development

The United Arab Emirates' approach toward the Sahel is distinguished by a comprehensive strategy that extends beyond direct security assistance to integrate counterterrorism, development, humanitarian action, and strategic partnerships. This approach reflects the recognition that the terrorist threat in the Sahel cannot be contained through military means alone, but instead requires addressing the conditions that foster extremism by strengthening the resilience of states and communities, promoting sustainable development, and expanding opportunities for long-term stability.

1. Supporting a Comprehensive Approach to Counterterrorism

The significance of the UAE's role lies in its recognition that terrorism in the Sahel constitutes both a security and a development challenge, rather than merely an armed threat to be addressed through military operations alone. Through its official positions and regional engagement, the UAE has consistently emphasized the importance of supporting security and stability across Africa, contributing to regional and international counterterrorism efforts, while simultaneously promoting development and humanitarian assistance. This integrated approach gives the UAE's strategy a balanced character by linking security objectives with efforts to address poverty, institutional fragility, and socioeconomic vulnerability.

2. Strengthening Cooperation with the Sahel and West African States

The UAE has expanded its engagement with Sahelian and West African countries—including Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, Chad, Benin, and Senegal—

through a combination of political, security, and development initiatives. This engagement reflects an appreciation of the Sahel's growing importance within African and international security dynamics, particularly in light of increasingly transnational threats and the need for reliable partners capable of supporting regional stability without the baggage of colonial legacies or overt political conditionality. Consequently, the UAE's engagement offers a pragmatic partnership model grounded in mutual interests and support for long-term stability.

3. Engaging in International and Regional Counterterrorism Efforts

The UAE has actively participated in a number of international and regional counterterrorism frameworks, including the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS and the Islamic Military Counter Terrorism Coalition. It has also supported stabilization efforts in the Sahel by contributing to initiatives related to the G5 Sahel and by providing logistical assistance in support of United Nations peacekeeping operations, including the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali. These efforts demonstrate that the UAE views the security of the Sahel not merely as a bilateral concern, but as an integral component of broader international efforts to confront transnational terrorist threats.

4. Linking Security Assistance to Local Capacity Building

The UAE's approach also emphasizes strengthening the security and defense capabilities of Sahelian and West African states through training, equipment provision, defense cooperation, and logistical support. Such assistance is particularly significant because restoring the capacity of national institutions to secure borders, protect civilians, and confront armed groups is a prerequisite for containing terrorism. The broader value of this support, however, lies in the contribution it makes to security sector reform and promoting professional standards. More crucially, it also helps strengthen trust between security institutions and local communities, ensuring that security remains closely linked to public confidence rather than functioning solely as an instrument of coercive power.

5. Leveraging Development as a Tool for Stability

The UAE's engagement extends beyond just security cooperation to include the financing of development and humanitarian initiatives across sectors such as healthcare, education, water, energy, and infrastructure. The UAE has provided assistance to Sahelian countries in these fields, while the Abu Dhabi Fund for

Development has pledged financial support for development projects in Mali. This dimension of the UAE's engagement is particularly important because development serves as a preventive instrument against extremism by reducing poverty and marginalization while creating legitimate economic opportunities for young people as alternatives to the economy of violence and recruitment by armed groups.

6. Advancing Humanitarian Diplomacy in Crisis Environments

The UAE's humanitarian diplomacy has particular relevance in the Sahel, where terrorism intersects with displacement, drought, food insecurity, and declining public services. Medical and food assistance, together with support for refugees and host communities, represent not only humanitarian responses but also practical contributions to reducing the socioeconomic pressures that terrorist groups frequently exploit for recruitment and influence. In this context, humanitarian action becomes an integral component of long-term stabilization by strengthening community resilience and reducing the likelihood that humanitarian crises will evolve into environments conducive to violent extremism.

7. Promoting a Partnership Model beyond International Polarization

The UAE's role is further distinguished by its engagement in a region characterized by increasing strategic competition among Western countries, Russia, Türkiye, and other external actors. Rather than positioning itself as an alternative to any particular partner, the UAE presents itself as a partner committed to supporting stability and development. This balanced approach enables the UAE to maintain constructive engagement within a sensitive geopolitical environment, where Sahelian states seek diversified partnerships without transforming the region into an arena of geopolitical rivalry. The added value of the UAE's approach lies in its emphasis on practical cooperation while linking security with development and humanitarian action.

8. Deepening Field Knowledge and Research Partnerships

The effectiveness of any external engagement in the Sahel depends upon a thorough understanding of local dynamics, including the activities of armed groups, smuggling networks, intercommunal conflicts, illicit economic systems, and the priorities of local communities. In this regard, research partnerships between think tanks and local institutions—such as the cooperation between InterRegional for Strategic Analysis and the Sahel Academy for Peace and Security Studies in Mali—play an important role in generating field-based and

analytical knowledge. Such partnerships contribute to the design of more effective policy interventions and strengthen policymakers' ability to integrate security and development within a deeper understanding of the regional context.

9. Building Resilience alongside Crisis Management

Through the approach it has adopted, the UAE aims to position itself as a long-term partner in resilience-building rather than as a simple provider of crisis management or temporary assistance. By combining security cooperation, humanitarian assistance, development investment, and capacity-building, the UAE's engagement is well aligned with the multidimensional nature of the Sahel crisis. Within a broader framework of regional and international coordination that respects the priorities of Sahelian states and strengthens their national capacities, this approach has the potential to contribute to a more stable environment across West Africa and to enhance regional efforts to combat terrorism, extremism, and organized crime.

VII. Opportunities and Risks for Stability in the Sahel

Recent developments in the Sahel highlight a complex landscape in which promising opportunities coexist with significant risks that could further deepen the region's instability. On the one hand, there is growing recognition of the limitations of military solutions and the need to integrate security, development, and governance. On the other hand, terrorist organizations continue to expand their activities by exploiting organized crime, state fragility, weakened regional coordination, and increasing competition among external partners. Consequently, the future stability of the Sahel will depend largely on the ability of regional governments and their international partners to transform existing opportunities into practical initiatives, while mitigating the risks that continue to fuel insecurity.

1. Growing Recognition of the Need for a Comprehensive Approach

The increasing acknowledgement that military solutions alone are insufficient presents an important opportunity to reshape responses to the Sahel crisis. Experience has shown that while security operations may temporarily reduce terrorist activity, they cannot by themselves address poverty, unemployment, inadequate public services, weak confidence in state institutions, or the expansion of organized crime. Accordingly, an integrated approach that combines counterterrorism with development, governance reform, institution-building, and community reconciliation offers a more sustainable foundation for long-term stability.

2. Prospects for Rebuilding Regional Cooperation

Despite the declining effectiveness of some traditional regional frameworks, there remains an opportunity to rebuild regional cooperation on more practical and flexible foundations. Terrorist organizations operate across national borders and cannot be effectively contained through isolated national policies. This reality underscores the need to strengthen intelligence sharing, coordinate border patrols, disrupt smuggling routes, and establish joint early warning mechanisms. New alliances and more flexible forms of cooperation between Sahelian and West African states could help fill the gaps left by the weakening of previous arrangements, provided they remain inclusive rather than contributing to further regional fragmentation.

3. The Trend toward Diversifying External Partnerships

Diversifying external partnerships provides Sahelian states with greater flexibility in obtaining security, development, and humanitarian assistance from multiple partners rather than relying on a single external actor or intervention model. Such diversification can support a broad range of priorities, including military training, development financing, infrastructure investment, and humanitarian assistance. However, these benefits will depend on the ability of regional governments to manage their external relationships strategically so that greater diversity does not evolve into uncoordinated competition or conflicting priorities.

4. Leveraging the UAE's Role to Promote Strategic Balance

The UAE's growing engagement offers an opportunity to support a balanced approach in the Sahel by combining security, development, and humanitarian dimensions rather than focusing exclusively on military assistance. The UAE is well positioned to contribute to counterterrorism efforts, promote regional stability, finance development initiatives, provide humanitarian assistance, and strengthen economic partnerships with West African countries. The significance of this approach lies in its recognition that the Sahel is a region that needs to build up its capacities and resilience over the long term, and it is not just a source of immediate security threats.

5. Prioritizing the Containment of Terrorism's Spread to New States

Balanced against these opportunities is the continuing risk that terrorist organizations will expand into new areas, particularly the Gulf of Guinea states and the Lake Chad Basin. The progression of violence from northern Mali to central Mali, and subsequently to Burkina Faso, Niger, and the borders of

coastal states, illustrates the ability of armed groups to open new fronts and exploit weak border regions. Unless this expansion is contained at an early stage, countries that have thus far remained relatively insulated from the epicentre of violence could face sustained terrorist pressure, causing the crisis to spill beyond the Central Sahel into the broader West African region.

6. Dismantling the Economy of Violence and Organized Crime

The enduring relationship between terrorism and organized crime remains one of the most significant threats to long-term stability in the Sahel. Networks involved in the trafficking of gold, fuel, weapons, narcotics, and people continue to provide terrorist groups with financing, mobility, and logistical support. As these illicit networks become more deeply entrenched, terrorist organizations become increasingly self-sufficient and less dependent on external sources of support. Consequently, military successes are likely to remain temporary unless accompanied by efforts to dismantle the economy of violence through measures like enhanced border management, closer oversight of informal mining, disruption of extortion networks, and the creation of sustainable economic alternatives for local communities.

7. Addressing Fragile Governance and the Erosion of Public Trust

Weak governance remains one of the most serious obstacles to sustainable stability. Limited state presence in remote areas, inadequate public services, corruption, unemployment, and declining confidence in public institutions continue to provide terrorist organizations with favourable conditions for recruitment and influence. Unless governments are able to restore an effective, equitable, and trusted state presence, temporary reductions in terrorist activity are unlikely to translate into lasting stability, as the structural conditions that enable extremism will continue to persist.

8. Limiting Uncoordinated International Competition

International competition in the Sahel presents a dual challenge. While it offers regional governments greater flexibility in selecting external partners, it also risks transforming the region into an arena of geopolitical rivalry. If geopolitical considerations win out over a more coordinated approach, this may lead to redundant initiatives, conflicting policies, and reduced effectiveness in the collective action being taken against terrorism and organized crime. Under such circumstances, terrorist organizations become the principal beneficiaries of fragmented international engagement and competing external agendas.

9. Responding to Climate and Demographic Pressures

Climate and demographic pressures further complicate the regional security environment. Drought, desertification, and the shrinking availability of arable land have intensified competition over natural resources, particularly between pastoralist and farming communities. At the same time, the region's rapidly growing youth population, combined with limited employment opportunities, increases the vulnerability of many communities to recruitment by armed groups or participation in illicit economic activities. Ignoring these environmental and demographic dynamics risks perpetuating local fragilities even if short-term security indicators improve.

10. Translating Opportunities into Practical Pathways

The balance between opportunities and risks demonstrates that stability in the Sahel will not be achieved simply by recognizing the complexity of the crisis. Rather, this understanding must be translated into practical and coordinated policies. Counterterrorism efforts should involve cutting off sources of funding for terrorist groups; security assistance should be integrated with security sector reform; development initiatives should prioritize the most vulnerable regions; and external partnerships should reinforce regional coordination rather than geopolitical competition. Within this broader framework, the UAE's balanced approach has the potential to make a meaningful contribution to regional stability by integrating security, development, humanitarian action, and local resilience-building into a coherent long-term strategy.

VIII. Proposed Courses of Action

The multidimensional nature of the crisis in the Sahel requires an integrated course of action that brings together security, development, governance, and regional cooperation. Terrorist organizations continue to exploit porous borders, organized criminal networks, weak local governance, inadequate public services, and competition among external partners, rendering fragmented responses insufficient. Accordingly, the most effective strategy should simultaneously reduce the ability of terrorist groups to operate, recruit, and finance their activities while strengthening state institutions, supporting local communities, and promoting well-coordinated international partnerships.

1. Strengthening Security and Military Cooperation

The countries of the Sahel and their neighboring states should enhance security and military cooperation to address transnational threats that extend beyond national boundaries. This includes strengthening intelligence-sharing mechanisms, coordinating border patrols, developing shared databases on

armed groups and smuggling networks, and establishing joint early warning systems capable of detecting terrorist movements before they evolve into broader regional threats. Such measures are particularly important because weak coordination between states provides armed groups with greater freedom to maneuver and relocate across areas of operational pressure.

2. Reforming the Security Sector and Protecting Civilians

Enhancing the capabilities of military and security forces through training and equipment alone is insufficient. These efforts must be accompanied by comprehensive security sector reform and stronger relationships between security institutions and local communities. Protecting civilians, minimizing abuses, strengthening professional discipline, and improving local security institutions are all essential to preventing terrorist groups from exploiting security-related grievances for recruitment and propaganda purposes. This means that building more capable security forces must go hand in hand with efforts to build forces that enjoy greater legitimacy and public trust, particularly in peripheral communities.

3. Disrupting the Financing of Terrorism and Organized Crime

Dismantling illicit financial networks remains a fundamental prerequisite for weakening terrorist organizations in the Sahel. These groups continue to rely heavily on the trafficking of gold, fuel, weapons, narcotics, and people, as well as extortion along transportation routes and local markets. Effective action therefore requires tighter oversight of informal mining operations, stronger anti-money laundering measures, enhanced monitoring of transnational smuggling networks, and closer cooperation among security agencies, customs authorities, and financial institutions. Sustainable progress in counterterrorism cannot be achieved without targeting the illicit economy that enables armed groups to survive and adapt.

4. Supporting Governance and Public Services in Peripheral Areas

Security initiatives should be accompanied by efforts to restore the presence of state institutions in remote and border regions through improved public services, stronger local justice systems, better public administration, anti-corruption measures, and expanded access to education, healthcare, and infrastructure. In the absence of effective state institutions, terrorist organizations are able to present themselves as alternative providers of security, justice, or economic opportunity. Re-establishing state authority therefore requires not only the deployment of security forces, but also the delivery of equitable public services and sustainable development so as to reduce communities' vulnerability to extremist influence.

5. Launching High-Impact Development Projects

Communities affected by terrorism require visible, high-impact development initiatives capable of restoring confidence in national governments and international partners. Priority projects include water and electricity infrastructure, rural roads, healthcare facilities, vocational training programs, and support for youth-led small enterprises. Not only do such initiatives provide practical alternatives to the economy of violence and illicit trafficking, but they also reconnect peripheral regions to the formal economy and demonstrate tangible improvements in daily life. This approach is essential to ensuring that development is viewed not as a distant objective, but as an immediate and credible component of stabilization efforts.

6. Promoting Community Reconciliation and Resolving Local Conflicts

Counterterrorism efforts in the Sahel must also address the local conflicts that terrorist organizations exploit to expand their influence and recruit new members, particularly disputes over land, water, grazing resources, and tensions between pastoralist and farming communities, as well as tribal and ethnic divisions. This requires strengthening local mediation mechanisms, engaging traditional, religious, and community leaders, and developing equitable frameworks for resource management while ensuring that reconciliation efforts remain closely linked to justice. As local conflicts diminish, terrorist organizations lose important opportunities to exploit grievances and transform them into drivers of violence and recruitment.

7. Strengthening Intellectual and Cultural Prevention of Extremism

An effective response to terrorism in the Sahel should include a preventive dimension focused on countering extremist narratives, strengthening education, promoting moderate religious discourse, and empowering local leaders to protect young people from radicalization. Terrorist organizations rely not only on armed violence but also on social media platforms, encrypted applications, locally tailored messaging, and disinformation campaigns to recruit supporters and undermine confidence in public institutions. Preventing extremism therefore requires intellectual, educational, and community-based initiatives that complement security and development measures.

8. Coordinating the Roles of External Partners

The diversity of external partners in the Sahel represents an opportunity when properly coordinated but becomes a source of risk when it leads to fragmented and competing initiatives. Greater coordination among regional and international

partners is therefore necessary to prevent duplication of efforts, reconcile competing priorities, and ensure that external assistance strengthens the capacities of states and local communities rather than increasing dependence on outside actors. International cooperation should ultimately support clearly defined regional and national priorities instead of turning the Sahel into an arena of geopolitical competition.

9. Shifting from Crisis Management to Resilience Building

The ultimate objective of engagement in the Sahel should be to strengthen the resilience of states and societies rather than simply managing immediate security threats. Achieving this objective requires integrating counterterrorism with governance reform, linking security assistance to civilian protection, directing development initiatives toward the most vulnerable regions, and ensuring that external partnerships align with locally defined priorities. While terrorist organizations can readily re-emerge as long as the structural conditions that sustain violence remain in place, resilience-building seeks to reduce their capacity to recruit, finance, operate, and re-establish influence within local communities over the long term.

Conclusion

The Sahel crisis demonstrates that terrorist threats in West Africa are no longer a limited security challenge that can be addressed solely through military operations or conventional counterterrorism arrangements. Rather, they have evolved into a multidimensional crisis driven by state fragility, weak governance, the expansion of organized crime, deteriorating development conditions, mounting climate and demographic pressures, and the reconfiguration of international influence across the region. As highlighted throughout this discussion, terrorist organizations have expanded their operations from northern Mali into the Central Sahel and onward the Gulf of Guinea states, while a separate but regionally interconnected terrorist threat persists in the Lake Chad Basin.” by exploiting porous borders, institutional vacuums, smuggling networks, and declining trust between governments and local communities.

This underlying reality makes it clear that the future stability of the Sahel will depend on the ability of regional governments and their partners to move beyond managing immediate threats toward addressing the conditions that enable terrorism to persist. Terrorist organizations endure not only because they possess weapons or operational capabilities, but also because they operate within environments characterized by poverty, unemployment, inadequate public services, weak governance, limited access to justice, and unresolved

local conflicts. At the same time, they rely on illicit economic networks that provide financing, mobility, and the capacity to regenerate their operational strength. Consequently, any strategy that fails to integrate counterterrorism with efforts to disrupt illicit financing, promote development, and strengthen trust between governments and local communities is likely to produce only limited and temporary results. Developments across the Sahel have also revealed the limitations of just substituting one external partnership for another. Even with the decline of Western influence, the emergence of new regional alliances, and the growing role played by Russia and Türkiye, the underlying dynamics of the crisis remain fundamentally the same, because the principal challenge is about more than just security assistance: it includes issues of state fragility, underdevelopment, and the weakening of regional institutional frameworks as well. Accordingly, this increasing international engagement in the Sahel can become an important opportunity only if it translates into coordinated partnerships that boost the capacities of states and societies. On the other hand, it may become a source of additional instability if cooperation turns into rivalry and a scramble for influence that leaves terrorist organizations with greater room to maneuver.

Within this context, the UAE's role assumes particular significance as part of a balanced approach that integrates security, development, humanitarian action, and strategic partnerships. The added value of the UAE's engagement lies not only in supporting counterterrorism efforts but also in linking security assistance with development initiatives, humanitarian programmes, capacity-building, economic partnerships, and active participation in international and regional frameworks that promote stability. This comprehensive approach enables the UAE to position itself as a pragmatic and constructive partner in supporting stability across the Sahel without getting drawn into intense geopolitical competition or reducing the region's challenges to their security dimension alone.

Ultimately, building sustainable stability in the Sahel requires a long-term strategy centered on strengthening security cooperation, advancing security sector reform, dismantling the economy of violence, improving governance and essential public services, implementing high-impact development initiatives, resolving local conflicts, and enhancing coordination among external partners. Within such a framework, the UAE's integrated approach has the potential to contribute to a more balanced path that combines counterterrorism with local resilience-building, supports governments while empowering communities, and aligns humanitarian assistance with long-term sustainable development.

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