

Terrorism, Insurgency, and Regional Security Cooperation in the Sahel: The Impact of Boko Haram and Islamic State in the Greater Sahara

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Abstract

This paper examines the dynamics of terrorism and insurgency in the Sahel, focusing on the operational, ideological, and regional impacts of Boko Haram and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS). By analysing their historical evolution, tactics, and cross-border influence, the study highlights how these groups exploit weak state institutions, porous borders, and socioeconomic marginalisation to sustain insurgent operations. Boko Haram's high-profile attacks and kidnappings in Nigeria and the Lake Chad Basin contrast with ISGS's guerrilla warfare and exploitation of ungoverned spaces in the Liptako-Gourma region, yet both contribute to regional instability and humanitarian crises. The paper further evaluates regional and international security responses, including the G5 Sahel Joint Force, ECOWAS, MNJTF, UN initiatives, and international military operations such as Operation Barkhane. Coordination challenges, political rivalries, resource constraints, and intelligence-sharing limitations are identified as persistent obstacles. Drawing on comparative analysis, the study emphasises the interplay between insurgent activity and governance deficits, revealing the necessity of integrated strategies that combine military interventions with socio-economic development, political inclusion, and regional cooperation. Finally, the paper provides policy recommendations and outlines future research directions, including technology in counterterrorism, local perspectives, and climate-security linkages, emphasising the urgent need to implement holistic approaches to secure sustainable peace and stability in the Sahel.

Keywords: Sahel, Boko Haram, Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), regional security cooperation, insurgency, counterterrorism strategies

Accepted 15/2/2026

Published 15/3/2026

1: INTRODUCTION: CONTEXTUALISING TERRORISM AND INSURGENCY IN THE SAHEL

1.1 Overview of the Sahel Region: Geographic, Political, and Socio-Economic Context

The Sahel is a vast ecological and cultural frontier spanning Africa south of the Sahara Desert from Senegal in the west to Sudan in the east, incorporating key states such as Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Chad, and parts of northern Nigeria (Wikipedia, 2026). Ecologically, the Sahel is defined by its semi-arid terrain, recurring droughts, and irregular rainfall, which have historically constrained agricultural productivity and fostered vulnerabilities to climate shocks (Wikipedia, 2026). Its geography as an expansive corridor of terrestrial and human mobility has historically facilitated trade and cultural exchange, but in the contemporary era, this same fluidity presents challenges for governance and security enforcement across porous borders. This makes the region distinct from more centralised states and

complicates efforts by national governments to project authority uniformly throughout their territories.

Politically, the Sahel is characterised by weak state authority, frequent leadership shifts, and fragile democratic institutions that struggle to maintain legitimacy outside urban centres. Many Sahelian states consistently rank among the world's most fragile or conflicted on indicators such as the Fragile States Index, reflecting deep deficits in state capacity, rule of law, and service delivery (Vision of Humanity, 2025). For example, successive coups in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger throughout the 2020s have destabilised governance structures, interrupted democratic transitions, and diverted attention from essential development and security challenges. These trends reflect broader patterns

84. Spring J. Artif. Intell. Curr. Issues

of political volatility where competing elites, ethnic cleavages, and weak accountability mechanisms create conditions ripe for non-state actors to exploit governance vacuums.

Socio-economically, the Sahelian states experience chronic underdevelopment, extreme poverty, and limited access to basic social services. According to multiple development indicators, Sahelian populations endure high levels of unemployment – particularly among youth – low educational attainment, and inadequate healthcare infrastructure (World Policy Hub, 2025). These structural inequalities contribute to widespread disenchantment with state institutions, eroding public trust and making alternative actors, including insurgent groups, comparatively more attractive in certain local contexts. Such socio-economic precarity stimulates both internal competition over limited resources and broader disaffection that insurgent recruiters can manipulate to build support networks.

Finally, the Sahel's strategic location places it at the intersection of global security concerns, making it a focal point of international counterterrorism cooperation and foreign military presence. While external actors such as the United Nations, European Union, and former colonial powers have engaged in regional security initiatives, these interventions have been uneven and at times contested by local populations. The withdrawal of certain international forces in the mid-2020s has further exacerbated security challenges, empowering non-state armed actors and intensifying regional conflicts (Tsukanov, 2024). Thus, the geographic, political, and socio-economic realities of the Sahel jointly shape the landscape in which modern insurgencies emerge and persist.

1.2 Historical Roots of Insecurity: Colonial Legacies, Weak State Institutions, and Marginalisation

The historical foundations of insecurity in the Sahel cannot be understood outside the legacy of European colonisation, which reshaped indigenous governance systems and imposed artificial territorial boundaries that cut across ethnic and cultural communities. Colonial rulers prioritised extractive economic policies over inclusive institutional development, creating centralised systems that often marginalised peripheral populations and limited local agency. According to geopolitical analyses, this legacy has left a profound imprint on postcolonial state structures, which remain ill-equipped to manage communal disputes, deliver equitable public goods, or mediate competing claims over land and resources — core drivers of social tension in the region (World Policy Hub, 2025).

Following independence in the 1960s, many Sahelian states struggled to build cohesive national identities and robust governance frameworks. Power often became concentrated in narrow political elites and urban centres, leaving rural peripheries disengaged from central decision-making processes. This dynamic

reinforces patterns of marginalisation, where communities located on the fringes of political influence find that the state offers little protection, infrastructure, or economic opportunity. The result has been fragmented authority, in which non-state actors — including tribal networks, local militias, and later insurgent groups — filled governance voids or positioned themselves as alternative sources of authority. Such fragmentation compounds the challenge of establishing stable, inclusive governance across the region.

The persistence of weak institutions is further evident in the repeated cycles of coups and governance disruptions that have plagued Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger in the last decade alone. These interruptions have weakened already fragile bureaucracies and diverted attention away from socioeconomic development toward immediate survival and power consolidation. A growing body of literature associates these institutional deficiencies with increased insurgent aggression: weak oversight, limited law enforcement capacity, and low civic participation create fertile conditions for extremist ideologies to take root, especially where local grievances — such as youth unemployment or the absence of social services — remain unresolved (Vision of Humanity, 2025).

Beyond institutional weaknesses, structural marginalisation has been compounded by transnational challenges such as illicit trade, contested grazing rights, and competition over scarce water resources aggravated by climate variability. Extremist groups have been adept at exploiting these interlinked structural grievances, framing their objectives in ways that resonate with locals disillusioned by the state's absence. Thus, insurgencies in the Sahel are not merely expressions of ideological extremism; they also reflect deeper historical and institutional failures that undermine social cohesion and state legitimacy.

1.3 Definition and Typology of Terrorism and Insurgency: Differentiating Boko Haram and ISGS

In academic and policy literature, **terrorism** is typically characterised as the calculated use of violence by non-state actors against civilian and governmental targets to induce fear, disrupt social order, or achieve political goals (Vision of Humanity, 2025). **Insurgency**, while overlapping with terrorism in tactics, also involves prolonged armed struggle aimed at contesting state authority or territorial control, often through guerrilla warfare and sustained campaigns of violence. In the Sahel context, these phenomena converge in complex ways, as multiple extremist networks engage in overlapping campaigns of violence that challenge traditional definitions and require nuanced analysis.

Boko Haram is one of the most notorious jihadist insurgent groups in the Sahel and Lake Chad Basin. Founded in northeastern Nigeria in 2002, it declared an insurgency in 2009 and rapidly evolved into a militant organisation responsible for widespread attacks on

civilians, military targets, and infrastructure (The Point, 2025). Boko Haram's strategic use of suicide bombings; mass kidnappings — including the globally publicised abduction of schoolgirls from Chibok; and attacks on rural and urban populations epitomise its violent modus operandi. Originally rooted in opposition to Western-style education and governance, its ideology has been calibrated to broader Salafi-jihadist currents, which facilitated links with the Islamic State and the formation of the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP).

In contrast, the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) emerged in 2015 as part of a cadre of affiliates aligned with the broader Islamic State movement. Its core area of operation is the tri-border region of the Sahel encompassing parts of Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso. Unlike Boko Haram, which is principally centred in the Lake Chad Basin, ISGS aggressively pursues influence in the Liptako-Gourma zone, engaging in attacks that target civilians, local authorities, and opposing armed groups (Africa Center, 2020). Research shows that ISGS has strategically exploited ungoverned spaces, imposing control over transit corridors and rural communities while seeking to establish governance regimes grounded in strict interpretations of Islamist doctrine.

Although both Boko Haram and ISGS adhere to Salafi-jihadist ideology, they differ in organisational lineage, territorial focus, operational tactics, and interactions with local populations. Boko Haram's insurgency has broader transnational spillovers into neighbouring Cameroon, Chad, and Niger, while ISGS has grown within the central Sahel's more fluid frontier zones (Africa Center, 2020; Vision of Humanity, 2025). Understanding these distinctions is critical for crafting effective policy responses: while both groups pose severe security threats, their differing structures and strategic priorities demand tailored analytical and operational frameworks.

1.4 Research Objectives and Significance

The principal objective of this study is to analyse the ways in which Boko Haram and ISGS have shaped patterns of terrorism, insurgency, and regional security cooperation throughout the Sahel. By comparing their origins, ideological frameworks, tactical approaches, and impacts on state authority, this research seeks to illuminate the complex interplay between insurgent violence and fragile governance structures. This comparative perspective is significant because it moves beyond a monolithic understanding of Sahelian violence, foregrounding the heterogeneous nature of insurgent threats and the varied responses they provoke among Sahelian states and international actors.

Another key objective is to evaluate how regional security cooperation mechanisms, such as the G5 Sahel joint force, Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), and ad hoc multinational task forces, have

performed in containing or mitigating the cross-border movements of insurgent groups. These cooperative frameworks are central to counterterrorism policy in the region but have faced persistent challenges, including limited logistical capacity, political disagreements among member states, and fragmentation of external partnerships. By documenting the successes and limitations of these initiatives, this study offers policy insights that extend beyond military responses to address structural inhibitors to cooperative security.

The significance of this research also lies in its potential to contribute to academic debates on state fragility, insurgency, and international security governance. The Sahel is now recognised as one of the world's most active theatres of extremist violence, accounting for a disproportionate share of global terrorism incidents and fatalities in recent years. As such, scholarship that contextualises Sahelian insurgencies within broader socio-political and economic transformations can provide critical insights for comparative studies of insurgency and counterterrorism in other global regions. Moreover, it underscores the importance of integrating local voices and grievances into policy designs that seek sustainable peace.

Finally, this research aims to enhance understanding among policy practitioners, regional policymakers, and international partners regarding the multi-layered nature of Sahelian insecurity. Rather than treating terrorism solely as a security problem, this study emphasises its roots in historical marginalisation, governance deficits, and socioeconomic exclusion, offering a more holistic framework for designing interventions that are politically feasible and socially resonant.

1.5 Methodology and Scope

This research adopts a **qualitative, comparative case study approach**, integrating empirical data, conflict event analysis, and secondary literature to explore Boko Haram and ISGS within the broader Sahelian context. Qualitative methods are appropriate given the research's emphasis on understanding *why* and *how* insurgent dynamics unfold, rather than merely quantifying violent incidents. This approach allows for a deeper exploration of ideological motivations, local socioeconomic drivers, state response strategies, and the efficacy of regional cooperation mechanisms.

Primary data sources include scholarly articles, policy reports from regional and international organisations, and documented conflict databases that track insurgent activities and fatalities over time. By triangulating these sources, the study mitigates single-source bias and provides a multidimensional perspective on insurgent behaviours and state responses. This methodological pluralism enhances the robustness of findings while situating them within well-established analytical frameworks.

The scope of this study covers the period from the early 2000s — marking Boko Haram’s emergence — through the 2020s, a period characterised by proliferation and transformation of insurgent networks in the Sahel. While the focus is on Boko Haram and ISGS, attention is also given to how these groups interact with other violent actors, state militaries, and international forces, as these interactions shape the broader security landscape. Geographically, the study spans the core Sahelian states of Nigeria, Niger, Burkina Faso, and Mali, recognising the transnational nature of modern insurgencies.

Finally, to ensure analytical rigour, this research situates empirical observations within broader theories of insurgency, state fragility, and regional security governance. By doing so, it contributes to both practical policy debates and academic discourses on contemporary terrorism in Africa.

2: BOKO HARAM: IDEOLOGY, TACTICS, AND REGIONAL SPILLOVER

2.1 Origins and Evolution: From Founding in 2002 to Factional Splits (Shekau vs. Ansaru)

The Islamist militant movement known as Boko Haram emerged in 2002 under the leadership of Mohammed Yusuf in northeastern Nigeria, initially presenting itself as a Salafi-jihadist group opposed to Western education and secular governance (Wikipedia, 2026). Yusuf’s vision was rooted in a fundamentalist interpretation of Islam that rejected Western influences and aimed to establish strict Sharia law in northern Nigeria. For several years, the group maintained a low profile, focusing on preaching and grassroots mobilisation among disenfranchised youth and communities neglected by the Nigerian state. Boko Haram’s early evolution reflected Nigeria’s broader political and socioeconomic frustrations, where poverty, unemployment, and governance deficits contributed to fertile recruitment ground for insurgent ideologies (Campbell, 2014; Wikipedia, 2026). This period laid the groundwork for the subsequent transformation of the movement from a fringe sect to a violent insurgency.

The insurgency formally ignited in 2009 when clashes between Boko Haram adherents and Nigerian security forces resulted in the death of Yusuf and hundreds of his followers, including many members of the original “Yusufiya” faction (Wikipedia, 2026; CTC West Point, 2012). This violent crackdown, intended to quash the group, inadvertently galvanised its transformation into a more radical and militarised organisation under the leadership of Abubakar Shekau. Shekau’s tenure marked a dramatic escalation in the group’s brutality and ambition, as Boko Haram shifted from occasional attacks against police and government targets to full-scale insurgent warfare involving suicide bombings, kidnappings, and attacks on civilians and security forces alike (Wikipedia, 2026).

Internal ideological and strategic disagreements subsequently catalysed significant fragmentation within Boko Haram. One of the first major splinter movements was **Ansaru**, which formally separated in 2012 due to disagreements over tactics and objectives, particularly criticising Shekau’s indiscriminate violence against Muslim communities (Wikipedia, 2026; Ansaru, 2026). Ansaru’s leaders, such as Khalid Barnawi and Abubakar Adam Kamar, pursued closer alignment with al-Qaeda-affiliated networks and targeted foreign nationals and military elements rather than mass civilian killings. While Ansaru has remained smaller and less operationally active in recent years compared to Boko Haram and its other factions, its existence highlights the ideological fluidity and factional complexity within the Nigerian jihadist milieu. These internal splits significantly shaped Boko Haram’s organisational dynamics, complicating both analysis and counterterrorism efforts.

The group’s evolution took another critical turn in 2015 when Boko Haram pledged allegiance to the Islamic State (IS) and rebranded its core combatants as the **Islamic State’s West Africa Province (ISWAP)**. This affiliation with IS represented both a strategic and symbolic shift, embedding the group within transnational jihadist networks and facilitating access to broader propaganda channels and resources. However, tensions between Shekau loyalists and IS-aligned leaders eventually led to a violent schism, with IS central leadership appointing Abu Musab al-Barnawi to lead ISWAP and sidelining Shekau’s faction. The resulting rivalry between Shekau’s Jama’atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda’awati wal-Jihad (JAS) and ISWAP persists today, each conducting independent operations with distinct strategic emphases, underscoring Boko Haram’s ongoing evolution and fragmentation (Wikipedia, 2026).

2.2 Operational Methods: Suicide Bombings, Kidnappings, and Rural Insurgency

Boko Haram’s operational methods have evolved significantly since its emergence, reflecting both shifts in strategic priorities and adaptations to changing security environments. The group is infamous for pioneering the use of **suicide bombings** in West Africa, initially employing male bombers before increasingly using female and younger operatives to evade detection and exploit social norms. Research indicates that Boko Haram was responsible for a dramatic rise in female suicide bombers, with the group accounting for a disproportionately high number of such attacks globally in the mid-2010s (Ojiego-Okoro et al., 2024). This tactic not only increased the psychological impact of its violence but also complicated intelligence and counterterrorism efforts, as female operatives were less likely to be suspected or profiled by security personnel.

One of the most internationally notorious tactics employed by Boko Haram has been mass kidnappings aimed at generating global attention, political leverage, and revenue. The 2014 abduction of approximately 276 schoolgirls from Chibok in Borno State became a defining

moment in the insurgency, sparking the global #BringBackOurGirls movement and exposing the group's capacity for high-profile, media-amplified operations (Wikipedia, 2026; Ojiego-Okoro et al., 2024). Kidnappings have since remained a hallmark of Boko Haram's operational repertoire, used both as a recruitment tool and as a means to extract ransom and other forms of financial support. The group's weaponisation of abducted civilians transformed the humanitarian landscape of northeastern Nigeria, contributing to widespread fear and displacement.

Beyond bombings and kidnappings, Boko Haram has sustained a **rural insurgency** characterised by guerrilla tactics that exploit the complex terrain of the Lake Chad Basin and Nigeria's northeastern hinterlands. The organisation's fighters have operated from ungoverned spaces such as the Sambisa Forest and marshlands surrounding Lake Chad, where state presence is weak and local surveillance is limited. These areas have served as sanctuaries for training, regrouping, and launching attacks against government installations and civilian communities (Wikipedia, 2026). The rural insurgency allowed Boko Haram to embed itself into local economies and societies, creating parallel systems of control and coercion that compounded governance challenges for Nigerian authorities.

Scholars highlight that Boko Haram's tactical adaptability from asymmetric suicide attacks to small-unit guerrilla operations has been a central feature of its longevity. The group's ability to shift between tactics depending on pressure from state forces or rival factions demonstrates strategic flexibility that complicates counterterrorism planning. This diversity of operational methods, particularly the blending of high-visibility terror acts with low-intensity but persistent rural insurgency, sets Boko Haram apart from other sub-Saharan militant movements and underlines the need for multidimensional responses.

2.3 Regional Impact: Cross-Border Attacks, Refugee Crises, and Economic Disruption

While Boko Haram originated in northeastern Nigeria, its insurgency has had profound **regional spillover effects** that transformed the Lake Chad Basin into a major security crisis in West and Central Africa. As the conflict intensified during the early 2010s, Boko Haram expanded its operations into adjacent Cameroon's Far North Region, Chad's Lac Region, and Niger's Diffa Region, exploiting porous borders and weak security cooperation among these states (Wikipedia, 2026; World Bank, 2025). Cross-border attacks, such as the 2016 suicide bombings in Bodo, Cameroon, which killed dozens of civilians, exemplify the group's regional reach and its capacity to project violence beyond Nigerian territory (Wikipedia, 2025). These attacks highlighted the transnational threat posed by Boko Haram and

underscored the limitations of national counterterrorism strategies confined within sovereign borders.

The insurgency has also triggered massive **forced** displacement and refugee flows, contributing to one of Africa's most acute humanitarian crises. Since 2009, millions of civilians have been uprooted from their homes, with many fleeing into neighbouring countries to escape violence and insecurity (Wikipedia, 2026; Ojiego-Okoro et al., 2024). These large-scale movements have strained social services, disrupted local economies, and exacerbated tensions in host communities already challenged by underdevelopment and resource scarcity. Research on the spillover economic effects of the conflict reveals significant declines in economic activity — including reduced cross-border trade and agricultural output — in areas proximate to the insurgency, amplifying vulnerability across the region (World Bank, 2025). The economic disruption associated with Boko Haram's activities extends beyond physical destruction to long-term impacts on regional development. Firms and markets near conflict zones face heightened uncertainty, leading to reduced investment and entrenched poverty, particularly in rural communities dependent on agriculture and pastoralism. These economic shocks have been shown to persist even when direct violence subsides, indicating deep structural consequences for regional economies in Cameroon, Chad, and Niger (World Bank, 2025). The cumulative effect of violence, displacement, and economic contraction thus reinforces broader fragility in the Lake Chad Basin, creating a vicious cycle that insurgent groups can exploit to recruit and expand their influence.

2.4 Counterterrorism Measures: Nigerian Military Operations, MNJTF, and Limitations

In response to Boko Haram's escalating insurgency, the Nigerian government and regional partners have deployed an array of **counterterrorism operations**, blending national military campaigns with multinational cooperation. Nigeria's military launched sustained offensives aimed at dismantling Boko Haram's territorial control and disrupting its command structures, most notably through the deployment of air strikes, ground operations, and intelligence-driven raids on insurgent camps (Wikipedia, 2026). These efforts, supported at times by Western partners and external military advisors, have yielded tactical gains, including the recapture of towns and the disruption of some Boko Haram strongholds. However, the insurgency's resilience and adaptability often diluted the long-term effectiveness of purely kinetic strategies, revealing challenges in translating battlefield successes into enduring security.

Recognising the transnational dimensions of Boko Haram's threat, the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) was established in 2015, comprising troops from Nigeria, Niger, Chad, Cameroon, and Benin, to coordinate

joint military actions against the insurgency (Wikipedia, 2025; Guardian, 2025). The MNJTF's creation signified an important step toward regional cooperation, enabling shared intelligence, cross-border patrols, and synchronised operations. Its interventions have at times forced Boko Haram fighters to retreat or regroup, and high-profile joint offensives — such as expelling militants from key towns — demonstrated the potential of regional collaboration.

Despite these efforts, persistent limitations have hampered the MNJTF and national military responses. Coordination challenges among member states, disparities in military capacity, and logistical constraints have undermined sustained operational effectiveness. Analysts have noted that the MNJTF suffers from poor resource allocation and limited intelligence sharing, reducing its ability to project force or protect vulnerable communities consistently (Guardian, 2025). Additionally, diverging political priorities among partner states — exacerbated by recent tensions, such as Niger's withdrawal from the task force — strain mutual commitment to collective security efforts and create openings that insurgent groups can exploit.

Another critical limitation is the overemphasis on military responses at the expense of addressing underlying socio-economic and governance factors that fuel insurgency. While kinetic operations may disrupt militant networks in the short term, they often fail to build sustainable local resilience or to integrate displaced populations back into secure livelihoods. The persistence of Boko Haram violence, despite years of counterterrorism campaigns, underscores the necessity of complementing military action with initiatives that strengthen state presence, foster economic opportunity, and mitigate grievances in marginalised areas.

2.5 Socio-Political Dynamics: Local Grievances, Recruitment Strategies, and Community Responses

Understanding Boko Haram's enduring appeal requires attention to the **socio-political dynamics** underlying its recruitment and engagement with local communities. Socio-economic marginalisation, chronic unemployment, and limited access to education and public services in northeastern Nigeria have created conditions of disaffection that Boko Haram has adeptly exploited in its recruitment strategies. Studies document how young men — often with little prospect for formal employment or upward mobility — are drawn to the group not solely through ideological persuasion but also by the promise of material support, social belonging, and symbolic resistance against perceived neglect (Le Monde, 2025; Ishaku et al., (2021). and Maza, (2020). In many localities, Boko Haram recruiters frame their messaging around grievances related to state absence,

corruption, and economic exclusion, enabling them to resonate with disillusioned youth who see few viable alternatives.

Beyond purely economic motivations, Boko Haram's recruitment tactics have been interwoven with identity and social networks, where allegiance often occurs within ethnolinguistic communities or through kinship ties. This embeddedness allows insurgents to leverage local norms and relationships to normalise participation and minimise suspicion from family or community members. Research highlights how insurgent operatives have engaged in cultural practices and community events, portraying themselves not solely as violent actors but as part of everyday social life, which blurs the lines between militant networks and civilian populations Ishaku et al., (2021). and Maza, (2020). These dynamics complicate government efforts to isolate extremist cells, as the social fabric of affected regions becomes intertwined with insurgent presence.

Community responses to Boko Haram's influence have been varied, ranging from resistance and collaboration with state security forces to reluctant acquiescence driven by fear or survival imperatives. Civilians have formed vigilante groups such as the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF) — to defend their communities and support military operations, illustrating local agency in countering insurgent threats. However, these groups sometimes operate autonomously and with limited oversight, raising concerns about human rights abuses and long-term governance implications. Meanwhile, some communities have been coerced into providing supplies or intelligence to insurgents under threat of violence, highlighting how Boko Haram's tactics exploit both fear and necessity to sustain influence.

Another dimension shaping sociopolitical dynamics is the differential relationships between local populations and competing insurgent factions. For example, ISWAP has at times engaged in more selective targeting and sought to cultivate support through limited distribution of resources or enforcement of order in areas under its control, creating a complex interplay between coercion and governance voids that affects population perceptions (Reddit discussions summarising counterinsurgency reports). This contrasts with Shekau's faction, which has been notorious for indiscriminate violence against civilians, further complicating local attitudes toward insurgent actors.

Overall, Boko Haram's longevity and adaptability cannot be fully explained by ideology alone; they reflect deep-seated socio-economic grievances, complex recruitment dynamics, and varied community responses shaped by fear, coercion, and survival strategies. These factors underscore the necessity of holistic policy responses that address the structural roots of insurgency rather than exclusively focusing on military defeat.

3: ISLAMIC STATE IN THE GREATER SAHARA (ISGS): EXPANSION AND THREAT DYNAMICS

3.1 Emergence of ISGS: Formation, Leadership, and Alignment with ISIS Central Command

The Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) emerged in 2015 as a discrete militant Islamist group within the volatile security environment of the central Sahel, particularly along the frontier regions of Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso. Its formation followed a formal allegiance to the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), pledged by Adnan Abu Walid al-Sahraoui, a former member of Al-Mourabitoun — itself an Islamic extremist faction with roots linked to Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) (United Nations Security Council, 2018). This oath of allegiance was publicly recognised in 2016 via ISIS's Amaq News Agency, establishing ISGS as an affiliate of the broader Islamic State movement. The process reflected ISIS's strategic expansion beyond the Levant to embed its ideology and organisational structure into diverse conflict theatres globally, including the Sahel, where existing local networks facilitated this integration (United Nations Security Council, 2018; CSIS, 2019).

ISGS's leadership under al-Sahraoui laid the organisational foundation for its subsequent growth. Al-Sahraoui's role was not purely symbolic but involved active network building across rural borderlands where state presence was weak, and sociopolitical grievances were pronounced. Under his command, ISGS rapidly shifted from a nascent faction of militant fighters into an autonomous operational network capable of executing complex attacks against military, governmental, and civilian targets (United Nations Security Council, 2018, 2020). This leadership strategy also involved consolidating fighters from diverse backgrounds, including defectors from other jihadist groups and locally recruited combatants, which diversified the group's personnel base while reinforcing its ideological commitment to a hardline Salafi-jihadist vision consistent with ISIS central tenets (CSIS, 2019).

Over time, ISGS's alignment with ISIS central transformed both its public messaging and tactical ambitions. Propaganda disseminated by ISGS mirrored Islamic State's broader narratives of establishing territorial control under stringent interpretations of Islamic law, often using brutal coercive practices to enforce compliance and signal ideological fidelity. The group's messaging increasingly invoked themes of resistance against regional states and their international partners, positioning ISGS not merely as a local insurgency but as part of a transnational jihadist project. This evolving identity — informed by affiliation with ISIS core — significantly enhanced the group's appeal to certain segments of the Sahel's disenfranchised populations while providing a recognisable ideological brand that distinguished it from other regional insurgent actors (CSIS, 2019; Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2020).

While ISGS initially operated with guidance from ISIS core structures, its autonomy has grown, particularly in organisational decision-making and local alliances. Analysts argue that the relationship between ISGS and ISIS centres on functions through pragmatic collaboration rather than strict hierarchical command, allowing ISGS to adapt strategies responsive to the unique political and social milieu of the Sahel while benefitting from the symbolic legitimacy conferred by ISIS association (CSIS, 2019). This hybrid model underscores ISGS's dual identity as both a regional insurgent movement and a constituent faction of a global jihadist network, complicating efforts to decouple its influence from broader Islamic State dynamics.

3.2 Tactics and Strategies: Guerilla Warfare, Attacks, and Exploitation of Ungoverned Spaces

ISGS's tactical repertoire encompasses a range of methods that reflect both classic insurgency strategies and adaptations to the Sahel's distinctive terrain and sociopolitical landscape. Crucial to its operational success has been the group's adoption of guerrilla warfare techniques that exploit the region's **ungoverned spaces**—areas where government presence is limited or absent due to logistical constraints, challenging geography, and weak institutional reach (Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2020). Such environments, particularly in the tri-border Liptako-Gourma region, provide ISGS fighters with natural cover for concealment, mobility, and staging attacks, complicating security forces' efforts to engage them effectively. From concealed positions, ISGS regularly mounts ambushes against both military convoys and patrols, maximising kinetic impact while minimising exposure to counterattacks.

Empirical evidence corroborates the effectiveness of this guerrilla approach. ISGS units have been linked to high-profile ambushes against state security forces, including the 2017 attack near Tongo Tongo, **Niger**, which resulted in the deaths of multiple Nigerien and U.S. soldiers, and a 2019 raid on a Nigerien army base in Inates that killed more than 70 soldiers (United Nations Security Council, 2018; CSIS, 2019). These operations demonstrate ISGS's capacity to coordinate armed strikes against conventional military units, challenging state control over strategic borderlands and signalling its intent to contest state authority through direct force rather than mere asymmetrical harassment. Such tactics have political and psychological effects, eroding confidence in state protection and signalling the insurgents' operational reach across national frontiers.

In addition to direct assaults on security forces, ISGS utilises **targeted violence against civilians** as a strategy to intimidate populations and undermine faith in governing institutions. Data analyses reveal that a significant proportion of ISGS attacks — particularly in Niger's Tillaberi region — have targeted civilian communities,

often accompanied by extortion, forced compliance, or collective punishment for perceived collaboration with state actors (Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2020). This pattern of violence is not random but systematic, aimed at disrupting social order while coercing communities into submission or passive acquiescence.

Moreover, ISGS has attempted to consolidate its influence by projecting rudimentary governance functions in areas where state services are absent. Reported examples include resolving local disputes, enforcing informal justice systems, and, in some instances, imposing social regulations such as bans on cultural practices — actions that mirror broader Islamic State tendencies to establish administrative control over captured territories (CSIS, 2019). While these governing behaviours are typically coercive and ideological, they serve a strategic purpose: presenting ISGS as a de facto authority capable of imposing order when formal state mechanisms fail. This blend of military pressure and pseudo-administrative presence contributes to the group's ability to sustain territorial influence despite constant pressure from external military forces.

3.3 Territorial Influence: Focus on Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso; Interaction with Local Armed Groups

The territorial footprint of ISGS is concentrated primarily in the tri-border region encompassing Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso, particularly the Liptako-Gourma area — a region defined by vast expanses of sparsely populated land and historically weak state oversight (Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2020; Nsaibia, 2024). In this vacuum of governance, ISGS has entrenched its operational presence, exploiting communal tensions, economic marginalisation, and state incapacity to broaden its influence. The group's operational distribution often follows strategic transit corridors and artisanal gold mining sites, enabling ISGS to project force across key economic and mobility nodes that cut through national boundaries (Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2020).

ISGS's territorial influence must also be understood in relation to its **interactions with other** armed groups in the Sahel. The complex militant ecosystem in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger includes patterns of both competition and tactical cooperation between jihadist networks, local self-defence militias, and ethnic combatants. While ISGS has at times clashed with rival factions, notably forces affiliated with Jama'a Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM), it has also benefited from periods of de facto coexistence where competing groups prioritise local dominance over direct confrontation (CSIS, 2019; Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2020). These interactions, though fluid, suggest that ISGS is not isolated but deeply embedded in the Sahel's broader insurgent ecology, calibrating alliances and rivalries to maximise territorial control.

In practical terms, ISGS's expansion has involved frequent incursions and establishment of influence zones that overlap with multiple national jurisdictions. Such diffusion complicates unilateral military responses, as operations must traverse international boundaries and coordinate among multiple state militaries, often hindered by mistrust, capacity deficits, and conflicting security protocols. The geopolitical result is a mosaic of insurgent control where ISGS — even without maintaining formal governance over contiguous territory — exercises significant leverage over population movements, economic flows, and local security dynamics in areas where state authority is fragmented or contested.

3.4 Comparative Analysis with Boko Haram: Ideological Differences, Operational Scope, and Transnational Ambitions

Although both ISGS and Boko Haram share ideological roots in Salafi-jihadist doctrine and affiliation with the broader Islamic State network, they differ markedly in strategic orientation, territorial focus, and operational scope. Boko Haram's insurgency originated in northeastern Nigeria and has historically centred on a struggle against perceived Western influences and state authority within the Lake Chad Basin, eventually evolving into **Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP)**. Its operations also spilt into Cameroon, Niger, and Chad, demonstrating a broader transnational footprint linked to a clear territorial claim (Global Conflict Tracker, 2026). In contrast, ISGS emerged later and is concentrated in the central Sahel's Liptako-Gourma region, with its identity and operations closely tied to localised socio-economic and security dynamics specific to Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso (Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2020; CSIS, 2019).

Operationally, Boko Haram's tactics have historically included mass kidnappings, suicide bombings, and large-scale assaults on both civilian and military targets, reflecting a strategy orientated toward symbolic high-impact violence. ISGS, while also employing direct attacks, emphasises guerrilla tactics, ambushes, and the strategic use of ungoverned spaces, reflecting adaptations to the mobility-dense and institutionally weak terrain of the central Sahel. Both groups engage in violence against civilians, but Boko Haram's global notoriety — especially following the 2014 Chibok schoolgirls abduction — has positioned it as an emblem of extremist brutality with broader international resonance (Global Conflict Tracker, 2026). ISGS, though less globally visible, has matched or exceeded Boko Haram in lethality in certain contexts, particularly through concentrated attacks on state forces and calculated exploitation of economic nodes such as livestock routes and mining areas (Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2020).

In terms of transnational ambitions, both movements

project themselves beyond local grievances, yet they differ in geographical projection and narrative construction. Boko Haram's strategic aims once included territorial governance over significant swathes of northeastern Nigeria and adjacent regions, and its alliance with ISWAP reflects broader ambitions beyond its original rural heartland. ISGS, meanwhile, operates primarily within the contiguous frontier zone of the central Sahel but has shown potential interest in expanding its reach into neighbouring states threatened by volatility and decreased military capacity. Its alliances and occasional tactical cooperation with other jihadist factions further complicate its transnational trajectory, suggesting potential expansion into littoral West African states if current instability persists (ACLEDD, 2023).

Studying these groups in comparative perspective highlights that, while both are products of the broader post-Arab Spring militant resurgence and global jihadist diffusion, their trajectories are shaped by distinct combinations of local conditions, strategic choices, and adaptive responses to counterinsurgency pressures. This comparative insight is essential for crafting differentiated analytical frameworks and policy responses that acknowledge both shared ideological roots and divergent operational realities.

3.5 Security and Humanitarian Consequences: Displacement, Attacks on Humanitarian Actors, and Destabilisation of Governance

The expansion of ISGS has had profound **security and humanitarian consequences** across the Sahel. The violence and instability generated by ISGS — alongside other insurgent groups — have contributed to some of the highest levels of displacement and humanitarian need in the world. In the broader context of militant violence across Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, millions of civilians have been forcibly displaced from their homes, seeking refuge in towns and neighbouring countries to escape violence, insecurity, and economic disruption. These mass movements have overwhelmed already strained humanitarian systems, exacerbating food insecurity, disrupting education, and eroding community resilience in both urban and rural settings.

ISGS's targeting extends beyond combatants to include actions that directly undermine humanitarian operations and the safety of aid workers. Attacks on supply convoys, abductions of humanitarian personnel, and threats against organisations engaging in relief activities have restricted the delivery of essential services. This hostile environment not only endangers aid workers but also reduces the capacity of international and local organisations to provide food, medical care, and shelter to vulnerable populations, amplifying crisis conditions in insecure regions.

Additionally, ISGS-linked violence contributes to the destabilisation of local governance structures. Where the state's authority wanes under the pressure of insurgent

activity, local governance — including traditional leadership, civil administration, and judicial functions — becomes compromised or collapses altogether. In such environments, insurgent groups are often the only entities capable of imposing regulation or resolving disputes, albeit through coercive and ideologically driven mechanisms. This vacuum reinforces local dependency on non-state authorities, erodes public confidence in formal institutions, and deepens political fragmentation.

The societal impacts of this destabilisation extend beyond immediate security concerns to include long-term implications for social cohesion and development. Children's education is disrupted when schools close due to insecurity; local markets decline when trade routes become unsafe; and public health deteriorates when access to clinics is restricted by fear of attack. The cumulative effect is a protracted humanitarian crisis that interlocks with security challenges, economic decline, and governance deficits, perpetuating cycles of vulnerability that insurgent actors can leverage to sustain their presence.

4: REGIONAL SECURITY COOPERATION, CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

4.1 Regional Mechanisms: Role of G5 Sahel and ECOWAS

Efforts to organise collective security responses in the Sahel began in earnest with the establishment of the Group of Five for the Sahel (G5 Sahel) in 2014, comprising Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger. The G5 Sahel Joint Force was originally envisioned as a geographically tailored mechanism to coordinate counter-terrorism, anti-trafficking, and security operations across borders where state presence was weak (Africa Center for Strategic Studies, (2019) Turn0search9). With financial and logistical support from the European Union and Western partners, the Joint Force structured its operations across multiple sectors, deploying battalions to key hotspots and integrating military planning among member states (turn0search9). The overarching rationale was that collective action would be more effective than isolated national responses, especially against jihadist networks that routinely exploited porosity in borders and uneven security capacities.

Despite these ambitions, the G5 Sahel's efficacy has been undermined by political shifts and resource constraints. By late 2023 and into 2024, several founding members — notably Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger — withdrew from G5 Sahel and in some cases joined the Alliance of Sahel States (AES), a new regional grouping that reflects divergent political orientations and strategic priorities among Sahelian states (turn0search11; turn0search6). These withdrawals have eroded the operational coherence and collective legitimacy of the G5 Sahel, resulting in questions about its future role and capacity to coordinate joint security operations.

92. Spring J. Artif. Intell. Curr. Issues

Observers argue that the disintegration of the G5 highlights broader structural issues, such as over-reliance on external support and insufficient integration of civilian institutions into security frameworks, ultimately limiting the initiative's ability to build sustainable, locally driven capacity, which is crucial for addressing the complex security challenges in the Sahel region.

Alongside the G5, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has long been a principal regional bloc concerned with both political stability and security cooperation. Historically, ECOWAS has tackled the insurgency challenge through strategic frameworks like the ECOWAS Counter-Terrorism Strategy and initiatives to operationalise its Standby Force for rapid deployment in crisis zones (turn0search0; turn0search13). Nevertheless, political tensions, including the withdrawal of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger following sanctions and disagreements over governance, have weakened ECOWAS's cohesion and diminished its influence in the central Sahel (turn0search0; turn0search13). This fragmentation, underscored by competing alliances and diverging security priorities, illustrates the challenges regional mechanisms face when political unity is compromised, even as insecurity remains pervasive.

4.2 International Engagement: UN Peacekeeping, Operation Barkhane, and U.S. Support

International actors have also played a significant role in Sahelian security cooperation. The United Nations and other multilaterals have advocated for strengthening regional collaboration as a core component of counter-terrorism and stabilisation efforts. For instance, United Nations Security Council officials have repeatedly emphasised the need to scale up support for regional frameworks like ECOWAS and the MNJTF while addressing critical humanitarian and governance issues underpinning insecurity (turn0search0; turn0search4). The UN has also underscored broader strategic requirements, including enhanced intelligence sharing, financial tracking mechanisms, and coordinated operations against terror financing networks (turn0search2). By coupling security support with calls for political dialogue and development investment, the UN approach reflects a more holistic paradigm of peace and security in the Sahel.

Beyond the UN, France's Operation Barkhane symbolised one of the most substantial Western military commitments in the region. Initiated in 2013 as Operation Serval and later expanded, Barkhane was designed to assist G5 Sahel states in counter-terrorism efforts, deploying thousands of troops and operating across multiple bases to disrupt extremist groups (turn0search1; turn0search9). While the operation contributed to tactical successes, such as the elimination of key militant leaders and support for regional forces, it also became a focal point of controversy, particularly among local populations

and new Sahelian governments who questioned France's influence and priorities (turn0search1). By the mid-2020s, shifts in local political sentiment and security strategy led to the withdrawal of French forces from several countries, underscoring the limitations of externally led military missions without sustained political and social legitimacy. The United States has also contributed through military aid, training, and logistical support, including backing for the G5 Sahel Joint Force and bilateral security cooperation with Sahelian militaries (turn0search3). U.S. involvement typically emphasises capacity building, intelligence collaboration, and targeted counter-terrorism support, rather than large-scale troop deployments. However, analysts note that while such support strengthens certain tactical capacities, it does not inherently address structural drivers of insecurity such as governance deficits, economic exclusion, and historical marginalisation (turn0search3). Together, international engagement in the Sahel has offered critical operational resources but also highlighted the complexities of aligning external support with locally driven security architectures.

4.3 Coordination Challenges: Political Rivalries, Resource Constraints, and Intelligence Sharing

Despite the establishment of multiple regional and international mechanisms, effective coordination remains elusive. One persistent challenge is political rivalry and fragmentation among Sahelian states, which undermines unified security responses. The decision by several central Sahelian countries to withdraw from ECOWAS and diverge toward alternative frameworks like the Alliance of Sahel States has weakened existing cooperation platforms and created competing architectures with differing external patrons and security doctrines (turn0search0; turn0search13). These rivalries reflect broader geopolitical alignments, including shifts toward non-Western partners, complicating consensus on regional strategies for counter-terrorism and governance reform.

Resource limitations are another major constraint. Regional forces such as the G5 Sahel Joint Force have historically faced chronic underfunding and logistical shortfalls that diminish operational sustainability. Donor pledges, while significant, often fall short of long-term needs for troop deployments, intelligence infrastructure, and support services and are heavily dependent on external financing rather than predictable, domestically sourced funding streams (turn0search12). This dependency limits the autonomy of regional cooperation and increases vulnerability to shifts in donor priorities.

Intelligence sharing further illustrates coordination gaps. Effective counter-terrorism relies on real-time information exchange across borders, yet mutual distrust among states and divergent security priorities hinder seamless cooperation. The lack of robust, institutionalised intelligence networks has allowed extremist groups to exploit gaps in surveillance and

response, moving relatively freely across porous boundaries between Sahelian states. Moreover, fragmented coordination reduces the ability to mount synchronised offensives and secure shared borderlands, perpetuating conditions that insurgent networks exploit (turn0search4; turn0search13). These challenges reveal how political fragmentation, funding disparities, and operational mistrust undermine the potential of regional security cooperation mechanisms.

4.4 Success Stories and Lessons Learned: MNJTF and Cross-Border Intelligence

Notwithstanding the coordination challenges, there have been notable successes illustrating the value of cooperative security efforts. The Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF)—encompassing Nigeria, Cameroon, Chad, Niger, and Benin—represents one of the most enduring regional frameworks, specifically focused on combating Boko Haram and affiliated groups across the Lake Chad Basin. While imperfect, the MNJTF has facilitated joint operations that disrupted insurgent sanctuaries and reinforced cross-border patrols, demonstrating how shared military planning can counter transnational militant threats (turn0search13; turn0news21). For example, coordinated offensives have regained control of key towns and limited insurgent mobility, providing temporary security improvements for affected communities.

The establishment of sustained communication channels has shown promise in cross-border intelligence collaboration. Sharing local threat data among border security agencies has enabled quicker operational responses and helped align national military movements, particularly in sensitive border corridors. These achievements, though limited by broader coordination issues, indicate that tactical gains can be realised when national forces prioritise information exchange and synchronised planning.

The lessons learned from these cooperative efforts highlight the importance of institutionalising mechanisms for sustained collaboration rather than ad hoc arrangements. Mechanisms that facilitate trust building—including regular joint exercises, shared command structures, and predictable funding arrangements—can enhance mutual confidence and operational effectiveness. Moreover, success in counter-terrorism requires aligning military gains with broader political and developmental strategies; purely kinetic victories are insufficient without corresponding efforts to build resilient local governance and community trust, which can be achieved through initiatives that promote inclusive political dialogue, economic development, and community engagement.

4.5 Policy Recommendations: Strengthening Joint Operations, Governance, and Root-Cause Responses

To address the shortcomings of past and current security cooperation efforts in the Sahel, a multifaceted policy approach is required. Strengthening joint operations remains critical. This includes institutionalising regional military coordination through well-defined command structures, shared intelligence databases, and interoperable logistic systems that facilitate rapid deployment and information flow. Predictable, pooled funding mechanisms anchored in both regional member states' commitments and international support can reduce reliance on ad hoc finances and reinforce long-term planning capacities. Institutional reforms within ECOWAS and emerging cooperative frameworks, such as explicit protocols for intelligence sharing—could mitigate fragmentation and ensure more cohesive collective action.

Strengthening governance and political inclusion is equally essential. Counter-terrorism strategies must be embedded within broader frameworks that enhance state legitimacy, promote democratic participation, and uphold human rights. As outlined in international policy dialogues, inclusive governance that respects civilian oversight and the rule of law reduces the conditions that insurgent groups exploit, such as marginalisation and exclusion (Turn0search2; Turn0search4). This implies supporting electoral processes, civic space expansion, and accountability mechanisms that build trust between citizens and government institutions.

Addressing root causes of radicalisation requires investing in socioeconomic development, education, and employment opportunities. Terrorist and extremist groups flourish where economic prospects are bleak and public services are weak. Efforts to expand infrastructure, improve access to quality education, and develop inclusive economic policies can mitigate underlying grievances that fuel recruitment into militant networks. Integrating development strategies—such as climate resilience projects and social protection programmes—into security planning acknowledges the interconnected nature of security, governance, and economic wellbeing.

Finally, policy reforms must prioritise comprehensive regional dialogue that includes all relevant stakeholders, including national governments, regional blocs, the African Union, and international partners. Bridging gaps between competing frameworks—including ECOWAS, the Alliance of Sahel States, and the G5 Sahel process—through negotiated platforms can create a more unified response to terrorism and instability, ultimately enhancing cooperation and resource sharing among these entities. Collaborative initiatives that balance security needs with respect for sovereignty, development priorities, and regional integration are more likely to yield sustainable

94. Spring J. Artif. Intell. Curr. Issues

peace and stability across the Sahel, especially when they involve joint efforts in resource management, conflict resolution, and community engagement.

5: CONCLUSION: ASSESSING THE IMPACT AND FUTURE OUTLOOK

5.1 Synthesis of Findings: Boko Haram and ISGS Impact on Regional Stability, Security Cooperation, and Governance

The preceding analysis has highlighted the profound and multidimensional impact of Boko Haram and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) on the Sahel. Both groups have destabilised regional security, exploiting weak state institutions, porous borders, and socio-economic marginalisation to expand their operational reach. Boko Haram's insurgency, centred in northeastern Nigeria and spilling over into Cameroon, Chad, and Niger, has relied on high-profile attacks, kidnappings, and rural insurgency tactics, generating mass displacement and severe economic disruption (Ojiego-Okoro et al., 2024; Wikipedia, 2026). In contrast, ISGS, operating in the Liptako-Gourma tri-border area, has leveraged guerrilla warfare, ambushes on military convoys, and occupation of ungoverned spaces to exert influence over Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso, while aligning ideologically with the Islamic State to embed itself in a transnational jihadist network (Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2020; CSIS, 2019).

Both insurgencies have exposed the limitations of national and regional security frameworks. While mechanisms such as the MNJTF and G5 Sahel Joint Force have achieved tactical gains, they are hindered by political rivalries, resource constraints, and intelligence-sharing gaps (Africa Center for Strategic Studies, (2024); turn0search4). Moreover, the persistence of violence underscores the insufficiency of purely military interventions. Governance deficits, local grievances, and economic exclusion remain critical drivers of insurgency, which these armed groups exploit to maintain influence. Consequently, the impact of Boko Haram and ISGS extends beyond immediate violence to systemic disruptions of state authority, local governance structures, and socio-economic resilience, highlighting the need for integrated approaches to security and development.

5.2 Predicting Trends: Fragmentation, Alliances, and Evolution of Insurgency Tactics

Future trajectories of insurgency in the Sahel suggest continued fragmentation and adaptation among militant groups. Boko Haram's split between Shekau loyalists and ISWAP illustrates how internal factionalism can produce divergent operational priorities, while ISGS's potential to form alliances with other jihadist entities or exploit emerging local conflicts may further complicate the security landscape (Wikipedia, 2026; CSIS, 2019).

Analysts predict that fragmentation may simultaneously generate smaller, more agile cells capable of evading conventional military responses and facilitate opportunistic collaborations that increase the scale and lethality of attacks.

The evolution of insurgency tactics is likely to reflect adaptive learning from regional counterterrorism measures. Suicide bombings, remote ambushes, and the use of women and minors in attacks — all hallmarks of Boko Haram's operational innovation — may serve as templates for ISGS and emerging groups (Ojiego-Okoro et al., 2024). Additionally, the incorporation of technology in operational planning, including communications encryption, remote surveillance, and social media for propaganda, is expected to increase, enabling insurgents to expand influence while limiting exposure to state detection. These dynamics suggest that future counterterrorism strategies must anticipate not only physical confrontations but also the increasingly sophisticated, networked nature of insurgent operations.

5.3 Strategic Implications for the Sahel: Balancing Military Intervention with Socio-Economic Development

The analysis confirms that while military interventions remain necessary to disrupt active insurgent networks, they are insufficient as a stand-alone strategy. Security operations must be complemented with **socio-economic** and governance initiatives to address the structural drivers of radicalisation. Investments in education, infrastructure, local economic development, and political inclusion are critical to undermining insurgent recruitment and building resilience in marginalised communities (United Nations, 2025; turn0search2).

Moreover, regional cooperation is paramount. The successes and limitations of the MNJTF, G5 Sahel, and ECOWAS initiatives illustrate that transnational threats require coordinated operational frameworks supported by sustainable governance reforms. Military interventions, when paired with initiatives to strengthen local administration, rule of law, and social services, can produce synergistic effects that reduce the conditions under which groups like Boko Haram and ISGS thrive. The strategic implication is clear: an integrated security-development nexus is essential for long-term stabilisation of the Sahel.

5.4 Recommendations for Future Research

Future research should prioritise **local perspectives** on insurgency and counterterrorism, integrating ethnographic and sociological insights to better understand community grievances, resilience mechanisms, and informal governance structures. Additionally, studies on the role of technology in counterterrorism including surveillance, cyber-intelligence

and predictive analytics — could improve strategic planning and operational responsiveness. Research should also explore the **climate-security nexus**, given that environmental stressors such as desertification, resource scarcity, and population displacement exacerbate vulnerabilities exploited by insurgent groups (World Bank, 2025). Interdisciplinary approaches bridging political science, security studies, and development economics are particularly valuable in crafting holistic frameworks for understanding and mitigating insurgency.

5.5 Closing Reflections: The Urgent Need for Holistic Regional Strategies

The collective findings of this journal underscore the urgent need for comprehensive, multi-layered strategies in the Sahel. Boko Haram and ISGS exemplify the complex interplay between ideology, socio-economic marginalisation, weak governance, and regional security dynamics. Tackling these challenges requires approaches that combine tactical military measures with sustained investment in governance, economic development, and regional cooperation. Failure to adopt such integrated strategies risks perpetuating cycles of violence, displacement, and instability across the Sahel and the broader West and Central African region. Ultimately, addressing insurgency in the Sahel is not merely a military endeavour but a long-term commitment to building resilient, inclusive, and well-governed societies capable of withstanding extremist pressures.

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96. Spring J. Artif. Intell. Curr. Issues

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