



The Sahel's Security Crisis: ISIS Expansion and Regional Destabilization

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Summary

ISIS's operational pivot to Africa, particularly the Sahel, highlights the group's ongoing global threat despite leadership decapitations.

This Insight examines the strategic relocation of ISIS elements, the evolving threat landscape in West Africa, and the broader security and humanitarian risks posed by militant expansion across the Sahel region.

Strategic Intelligence Insight

I. ISIS's Strategic Repositioning to Africa

- **Post-Caliphate Adaptation:**

Following territorial defeats in Syria and Iraq and successive leadership losses, ISIS has shifted its strategic focus toward Africa, prioritizing operational expansion over hierarchical command structures.

- **Low-Profile Leadership:**

Successive ISIS leaders have remained largely anonymous, emphasizing organizational ideology over charismatic leadership to facilitate decentralized expansion.

- **Alternative Battlefields:**

Africa, particularly the Sahel, now serves as ISIS's primary arena for sustained operations, recruitment, and influence projection.

II. Rising Influence Across the Sahel

- **Key Militant Actors:**

Boko Haram and Al-Shabaab, having pledged allegiance to ISIS, remain the most violent Islamist groups in Africa, sustaining ISIS's ideological and operational momentum.

- **Critical Regions Affected:**

Mali, Nigeria, Ghana, Senegal, Cameroon, Burkina Faso, and Niger face increasing militant incursions and internal displacement pressures.

- **Resource-Driven Conflicts:**

The Tri-border region (Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger) — rich in gold, oil, uranium, and coal — has become a strategic stronghold for militant financing and operations.

III. Security Vacuum and International Challenges

- **Collapse of Regional Counterterrorism Cooperation:**

Recent military coups and the withdrawal of French forces, replaced in part by Russian Wagner elements, have weakened collective security efforts.

- **UN and Coalition Responses:**

Despite deployments by the United Nations Peacekeeping Force (MINUSMA) and the Africa Focus Group within the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS, escalating violence continues to destabilize local governance structures.

- **Migration and Humanitarian Fallout:**

Intensifying conflict has driven massive internal displacement and refugee flows, exacerbating regional humanitarian crises.

IV. Expanding Threat to Sudan and Beyond

- **ISIS Interest in Sudan:**

ISIS propaganda has encouraged the establishment of a "Wilayat of Sudan," seeking to exploit state collapse amid the Sudanese army–RSF conflict.

- **Cross-Border Recruitment:**

Militants from Niger, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Central Africa are anticipated to augment RSF forces and exacerbate instability.

- **Security Breaches:**

Arms smuggling incidents into Port Sudan underscore the risk of expanded militant operations amid Sudan's internal fragmentation.

V. Strategic and Regional Implications

- **Persistent Power Vacuum:**

The Sahel's security architecture remains critically fragile, with terrorist groups exploiting governance vacuums to entrench operations.

- **Threat of Widening Insurgency:**

Without coordinated counterterrorism initiatives, the Sahel's destabilization risks spilling over into neighboring regions and further complicating global counterterrorism efforts.

- **Erosion of Democratic Prospects:**

Development and democratization efforts remain stalled, with enduring conflicts reinforcing cycles of authoritarianism, rebellion, and extremist violence.

Indicators to Monitor

- ISIS-affiliated operational expansions into new African states or regions.
- Shifts in international counterterrorism coalition deployments and strategies.
- Increases in cross-border militant recruitment linked to conflicts in Sudan or the Tri-border region.

Analyst Reflection

The Sahel's worsening instability reflects the adaptive resilience of global jihadist movements. ISIS's shift to Africa reveals a long-term strategy to embed itself within security vacuums, posing escalating risks to regional stability, humanitarian security, and broader international counterterrorism objectives.