

Escalation of Terrorism in the Sahel Region and Information and Communication Technology, 2018-2023: Treading an e-Counterterrorism Path

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Abstract

[Purpose] The current innovations in information and communication technology, as demonstrated by computers and smart phones with social media platforms and applications, are believed to have enhanced and sustained terrorist campaigns currently widespread in the Sahel. In the interim, violent extremism apparently reduced in other parts of the world while the Sahel region has turned into a hub of terror attacks with an up to 43% spike in fatality rates by global ranking. The paper explored the nexus between the current upsurge of violent extremism in the Sahel region and worldwide usage of Information Technology.

[Methodology/approach/design] The social-learning and frustration-aggression theories logically analyzed the phenomenon while qualitative method of data collection was adopted, including key informant interviews.

[Findings] The study revealed that the ICT applications were a major contributor to the escalation of terrorism in Sahel region and deemphasized the sole reliance on internal military actions; while encouraging international collaborations among the states to embrace an aspect of artificial intelligence (AI) branded e-counterterrorism, to tackle the menace.

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[Practical implications] Again, addressing poverty and unemployment rates adequately can help lower the humanitarian crises triggering restiveness in the region.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence. Counterterrorism. Poverty. Social Media. Violent Extremism.

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary studies and experience have shown that modern terrorism, which has been more prevalent in recent years in the Sahel, is being enhanced and sustained by the information and communication technology (ICT). Violent onslaughts are employed to advance political goals, among other concerns. Through its numerous innovations and benefits, the internet has aided the process of globalization and has also been implicated in fostering overt extreme violence. As it were, due to its enormous speed and coverage, it has mostly replaced print and other physical media and also turned it into a veritable tool for terrorists' maneuvers. Terrorist groups now easily spread their message and goals over the globe via the internet, helping them recruit new members, plan international assaults, and moreover, elude detection. This particular development has, significantly, complicated efforts to uncover terrorist schemes. The terrorist organization known as the "Islamic State" (ISIS) is apparently the first to utilize the influence of social media in the internet system. Numerous thousands of foreign fighters have been attracted to the organization through their well-planned web propaganda operations. Bruce Hoffman subscribed to the effect of internet usage by making the case that terrorists can now bypass conventional print and broadcast media by using the internet low-cost but expertly produced and edited video recordings, using their own dedicated 24/7 television and radio news stations. The effects of these developments are extensive despite the fact that they are still poorly understood. These innovations have already changed how terrorists can communicate without restriction or other obstacles, attracting new sources of supporters and funding that governments have found challenging, if not impossible, to combat (Hoffman, 2013). The aforementioned factors explain why, despite dedicated efforts to reduce it, domestic and international terrorism has been on the rise, especially in the Sahel. This has motivated this article to examine the essential part the globally distributed information and communication technology has played in fostering the rise in terrorism that spread more quickly and has been sustained in the Sahel more than before.

It will be recalled that between the 1970s and 1990s, there were relatively no incidences of terrorism recorded in the Sahel. The only forms of violence were civil wars in some West African States like Liberia, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, etc, and pockets of civil unrests in others. The advent of Boko Haram in Nigeria kicked off the trend of violent attacks on the civil society and the state from 2002 till today, under the leadership of the late Mohammed Yusuf. The insurgency has, over time, bloated out of proportion throughout the region. To this extent, there have been more splinters from this group, like the Islamic State of West African Province (ISWAP). Some spillovers are even believed to have been absorbed by the Bandit terrorist groups pillaging northwestern Nigeria till date, and some other Islamist groups spread across most countries in the Sahel. Be that as it may, I argue that this deadly restiveness has become perennial in the region because the leadership appears too weak to confront and eradicate them. This obviously stems from an attitude of not having regard for human lives that they were sworn in to protect. This assertion is informed by the fact that the Sahel governments have been solely relying on military arms confrontation to combat the insurgencies. I therefore make a case in this study to deemphasize this military strategy and move more towards the employment of a viable, proactive alternative known as Artificial Intelligence as it has been used in many cases by the Western world to fight and reduce terrorism. In this case, like a disease, the cause of the rise in the attacks is essentially the cure.

In line with this quest, Alao et al. (2019) contended that Boko Haram in Nigeria has used cyber terrorism to recruit and train people, collect cash, carry out political propaganda, coordinate the majority of their attacks, and seal foreign partnerships with more advanced cohorts. Unfortunately, because there is no specific geographical area where the groups are concentrated, the internet cannot afford to separate the terrorists from other World-Wide-Web users since every individual can privately utilize its applications anytime, anywhere and anyhow. According to reports, there were 4.39 billion active internet users globally as of January 2019 (Kemp, 2019). The number is reportedly based on a 7,519,028,970 global population estimate, making ICT the technology that has had the highest expansion in the modern era (Orngu, 2014). Terrorists are increasingly using the internet as a weapon not just in the Sahel but across the globe. They use it to monitor the operations of governments by hacking into data bases, monitor people anywhere, and attack any type of government facility (Onuoha, 2011, Ntamu, 2014).

Global Terrorism Index (2022) report depicted that global technological advancement has increased the use of information technology by terrorist organizations. Its products, such as missiles and drones, extend the range of their assaults while lowering the number of casualties they incur. They can expand

their networks, broadcast their propaganda more readily, and recruit more people easily via technological breakthroughs like the Smartphone with social media platforms, which has built-in applications. Terrorism in the Sahel region increased as a result of the recent growth of Islamic State (IS) and its allies. Owing to this problem, recorded deaths by terrorism in the Sahel are over 1000 per cent from 2007 to 2021. The Sahel terrorism is rapidly spiraling out of control in the interim. In recent years, there have been eight coup attempts in Mali, Burkina Faso, Chad, and Guinea. The main contributing factors include the lack of food, inadequate water supply, rapid population increase, and the existence of weak governments. In the Sahel, terrorism has undergone a number of recent shifts that have seen the emergence of new groups and the collaboration of some states to advance local, regional, and global counterinsurgency and counterterrorism activities.

According to reports by United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (2013), the spate of extreme violence or terrorism has decreased globally in other climes. On the contrary, the Sahel region of Africa is currently experiencing a spike in terror-related attacks, with more people dying as a result. This increase is apparently caused by a reported humanitarian crisis that has been exacerbated by the governments' inability to provide good governance that has entrenched a high level of poverty. For clarity purposes, the Sahel region include countries such as Cameroon, Burkina Faso, Gambia, Nigeria, Mali, Senegal, Guinea, Mauritania, Chad, and Niger. The area is situated between the Sudanese savanna in the south and the Sahara in the north.

Basically, from experience, the employment of time bombs, suicide bombs, large-scale shootings with high-tech machine guns, expert hijackings of international planes, kidnappings for ransom and other vices, are all known to be used in terrorist operations. Though, the majority of internet goods are produced in or imported from more advanced western nations that decry and combat terrorist organizations, but it is nearly hard to identify the final consumers. Through internet networks, it has been proven how clandestine organizations can efficiently utilize contemporary communications tools to recruit foreign adherents to their ranks and inspire others to carry out sole violent actions on the citizens of their own countries. It has also made travel easier via modern transportation networks, enabling the launch of terrorist acts abroad.

The foregoing scenario has instigated this paper to investigate how the application of Information Technology by terrorist groups has enhanced the upsurge of violent extremism in the Sahel region of Africa. The study spans a period between 2018 and 2023 because, within this period, the Boko Haram onslaughts were declining while other dimensions to violence rose, exponentially, in Nigeria during this period coupled with the fact that the rate of

terror attacks were rising generally within the Sahel up to recent times. The paper will pursue the research objective by employing the secondary method of data collection while also engaging some notable personalities in interviews related generally on the subject matter to elicit more reliable information. These will be elaborated in the course of our study as a review of related literature will be useful at this point.

LITERATURE REVIEW

As observed by Black (2014), globalization of Information Technology (IT) has had a significant impact on the prevalence of terrorism and its use of modern tactics by making it easier for weapons to be trafficked over international borders. The availability of contemporary communications and transportation has given violent organizations the chance to share knowledge, communicate with members who are located far away, and recruit new members. Additionally, it has given terrorist organizations more chances to use their attacks as a kind of influence over other people. Although leaderless anarchists used murder campaigns to carry out an early form of resistance attacks, the internet and social media have made today's version of terrorism more common and effective.

Coninx (2019) averred that currently, more terrorist actions are being supported by the internet and social media. These include spreading hate speech, radicalization, recruitment, getting prepared, raising money, organizing, gathering data, and training. In essence, mankind is supposed to reevaluate how to employ counterterrorism and understand the complexities of ICT and the various ways that criminal actors and terrorists utilize it. To this end, the UN Security Council urges member states to encourage cooperative activities in this area of concern; highlighting the significance of digital technology in the battle against the worldwide threat of terrorism. In this effort, Security Council Resolution 1373 calls on all member states to devise strategies to sharpen and advance information-sharing on how terrorist movements are using ICT, as well as to lessen terrorist recruitment trends. In order to recognize the growing relationship between ICT and terrorism, Resolution 2129 was approved in 2013. In the modern era, social media has become pervasive everywhere in the world. This includes those who use social media platforms to spread extremist beliefs and thereby promote terrorism.

According to IVolunteer International, 4.66 billion people used the internet actively in 2021 alone. With 4.26 billion people using at least one social media site by 2021, estimates had it that a respectable number of people utilize social media. This number represents the majority of the world's population, which is more than half of it. Terrorists and political fanatics leverage on social

media, in this case, to propagate their messages. For instance, the IVolunteer reported that between 2005 and 2016, 65% of terrorists utilized Facebook to express their opinions and encourage extremist behavior. In 2021, FBI Director Wray Christopher made a comparison between the rise of extremism on social media and foreign misinformation tactics. The encouragement of higher education by studies like this one can assist national security officials in identifying and addressing the dangers posed by the spread of violent extremism through social media. (www.onlinewilder.vcu.edu/).

McGrew (2011) highlighted globalization as an alleged complicated process involving the growth, intensification, and advancement of worldwide connectedness that also supports the usage of ICT since they are intertwined. As a result of globalization, terrorism has spread to other nations. Strong evidence suggests that globalization's trends and advancements have greatly helped terrorism via the ICT. For instance, the increased communication technology has made it simpler to quickly reach any area of any given country in the world through the use of mobile banking, online movies, television broadcasts, and other social media platforms unwittingly enhancing terrorist organizations' operations.

Arguably, globalization has been seen differently by distinct individuals and at contrasting times, according to Wilkinson (2003). "Exchanging ideas, goods, and people" is how Zimmermann (2011) defines globalization as the expansion of technology and culture, which is tied to globalization. In this way, terrorism and trade have both been impacted by globalization. Technological advancement, commercial openness, and shifts in global markets have all helped to boost production, trade, and information flow within and across terrorist organizations. While terrorists gained from globalization in the form of increased attack effectiveness and damage, businesses now face larger risks and faster assault speeds due to rising costs associated with prevention. Political issues in some nations are related to globalization since it stimulated the emergence and usage of contemporary terrorism. As a result, the fundamental inquiry that needs to be made in this situation is whether or not increased levels of globalization and technology may be linked to increased levels of terrorism. It is possible to evaluate if different levels of globalization have, in fact, contributed to widespread terrorism by study of terrorist attacks in the Middle East, North Africa, and the Sahel (Lutz B. and Lutz J., 2015; Li and Schaub 2004).

Coninx (2019) succinctly noted that given the rapidity of technological advancement, the rate of ICT utilization in terrorist attacks continues to grow as a danger to global security and peace. It was predicted that there would be at least 20 billion connected Internet of Things (IoT) applications and devices by

the year 2020. This risk ultimately includes vital infrastructure and industrial control systems. Considering this, there is an understandable concern that terrorists may continue to develop their capacity to carry out internet-based assaults, which might result in the widespread destruction of essential infrastructure including energy, water supply, and transportation networks. In connection with this, there are rumors that Da'esh (ISIL) and other terrorist groups seek to enlist personnel who are capable of carrying out such assaults.

Roser et al. (2019) reminisced that terrorism emerged following the time nationalist movements grew in strength throughout the former colonies of European imperialism. These early anti-colonial organizations understood how terrorism may raise awareness of their cause and have an impact on global politics. Correlatively, Hoffman (2013) maintains that the ability of these groups to mobilize allegiance and support outside the borders of their actual states or locations has made similar aggrieved groups elsewhere aware that terrorism is a real tool for turning local conflicts into global issues. Since the 1960s, this development has intensified global terrorism. But in recent times, these have been tagged religious terrorism. In essence, political scientists and actors who previously had little interest in religious issues are now agitatedly discovering religion. On the other hand, political violence and conflicts are drawing more and more attention from religious historians, sociologists, anthropologists, and other fields of study (Rogers, 2015).

Nugroho (2016) rightly observed that since Osama Bin Laden's al Qaeda bombed the World Trade Center in the US on September 11, 2001, the international community has been extremely concerned about the tide of terrorism. Humanity entered the current period of modern terrorist movements in the 1980s. These movements, which are not unique to any state, are constrained by reason through secular ideas, and include religious symbolism in their operations to alter the structure of society. This trend includes al-Qaeda and the organizations it has ties with like the so-called Islamic State (IS). The establishment of a universal Islamic caliphate is their ultimate goal. Since violence can occur for religious purposes or otherwise connotes that religion itself is not the primary source of violence or terrorism. However, religion offers symbols that make justification for wrongful killings simpler to be justified by the adherents.

In a recent research report by the Institute of Economics and Peace (IEP) in its Global Terrorism Index (2022), some of the most dangerous and rapidly expanding terrorist organizations in the world, including the ISIS, have found refuge in the Sahel. Compared to 2007, when the incidence of terrorism-related deaths was barely 1%, the Sahel region can likely account for 35 to 48% of all terrorism-related deaths worldwide in 2021. This is because the Islamic State

(ISIS) has been funding substantial terror campaigns throughout the region through the application of the ICT platforms. The Sahel region of Africa was home to four of the ten states with the highest increases in terrorist attack fatalities, hitting nations like Niger, Mali, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Burkina Faso. A minimum of 40 fatalities were reported in each of the Sahel countries in 2021, with the exception of Mauritania. As an illustration, the totals for Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso were 574, 588, and 732, respectively. Now, let us take a brief overview of some of the attacks in the most terrorized countries in the Sahel region.

NIGERIA

Nigeria is one of the nations with the greatest reported incidence of terrorist strikes worldwide, as Sasu (2022) emphasized. Despite the fact that Boko Haram terror-related deaths are currently on the decline in recent years, terrorism in Nigeria has resulted in 1245 fatalities while kidnappings have reached 390. The death toll from the ongoing fight between Nigeria and Boko Haram had reached 22,000 over the years. From January 1 to January 17, 2022, at least 220 persons died in Nigeria alone in the states of Kebbi, Niger, Zamfara, and Plateau. In actuality, the first week's 216 deaths were as follows: 200 in Zamfara, seven in Kaduna, three each in the Plateau, Akwa Ibom, and Ondo. 37 fatalities were reported in the following states during the second week: 18 in Plateau, 1 in Abuja, 1 in Imo, and 17 in Kebbi. 13 individuals lost their lives during the third week, with 3 dying in Kaduna, 4 in Ebonyi, 1 in Akwa Ibom, and 5 in Niger State. Bandit terrorist groups committed more than 80% of these murders in the Northwest and Northcentral geopolitical zones (Aytogo, 2022). According to an investigative study, banditry and terrorist acts in Nigeria increased once more in 2022, resulting in a high death toll of 7,222 individuals and 3,823 kidnappings between January and July. In this regard, a breakdown based on the country's geopolitical zones would show that the North-East would have 777 attacks, resulting in 2,052 fatalities and 344 abductions. In a similar vein, there have been 519 attacks in the North-West, resulting in 2,229 fatalities and 1,989 kidnappings. In the North-Central, at least 494 attacks took place, resulting in 1,748 fatalities and 950 abductions (Oloko, 2022).

NIGER REPUBLIC

In Niger Republic, the number of fatalities had increased by 50% in 2020, totaling 588. Islamic terrorist organizations such as Boko Haram, Islamic State in West Africa (ISWA), Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM), and Al-Shabaab were responsible for deaths that were reported with up to 43% of

the occurrences occurring in the Sahel region alone. The majority of terrorist assaults took place near to borders without being under official supervision. In addition, many criminal organizations increasingly pose as Islamic insurgents to carry out their operations. With the most fatalities and attacks in 2021, Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin is the terrorist organization with the greatest rate of expansion in the world. Within the same period, JNIM was accountable for 351 fatalities in the same year, depicting an increase of 69%. As the most hazardous group in the area, ISWA was responsible for roughly 15.2% of all attacks' fatalities in Niger (Martin, 2022). Before dividing into two factions in September 2016, Da'esh (previously ISIL, based in Iraq and Syria) had accepted an oath of loyalty from Boko Haram in March 2015. Attacks by these groups typically occur in northern Cameroon (www.gov.uk). Highlights from the GTI Report (2022) revealed that the Sahel is mired in a number of intricate political and socio-economic woes that have evolved into significant security issues. These therefore obstruct progress in a variety of areas. The number of deaths caused by these attacks has increased up to ten times in size between 2007 and 2021.

BURKINA FASO

As held by reports from Burkina Faso, Jihadist group strikes resulted in the deaths of 33 soldiers and the injuries of 20 more in an attack in Ougarou. In return, the soldiers neutralized 40 terrorists. (Aljazeera News, 2023). Additionally, in the eastern region of Kopinga, 40 army auxiliary and civilians were slain in a span of three weeks. Over 237,000 people were forced to leave their homes in Burkina Faso as a result of ongoing attacks by armed terrorists in 2021. Since 2016, more than 1.4 million people have become internally displaced (IDPs), or about 6% of the population of the country (Human Rights Watch, 2022). Since 2015, the nation has been the target of Jihadist assaults by organizations affiliated with al-Qaeda and the Islamic State, which have claimed the lives of more than 2000 Burkinabe (Africa News, 2022). The biggest number of terrorism-related fatalities in 2019 occurred in Burkina Faso, where there was a rise from 86 to 593; an increase by 507 deaths. Three deadly organizations, namely Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM), Islamic State in Greater Sahara (ISGS), and the Burkina Faso branch of Ansar al-Islam, were mostly responsible for this rise in attacks (OCHA, 2021).

CHAD

Around the northern and eastern portions of Lake Chad, Boko Haram and the Islamic State of West Africa (ISWA) have been conducting ongoing attacks.

The majority of these assaults were raids intended to steal supplies. However, terrorist groups with more than 100 militants have carried out several, serious attacks on military outposts in Chad. In their attacks, the terrorists employed a variety of strategies, including suicide bombers, ambushes, improvised explosive devices, and kidnappings. Here are a few of the attacks that happened. In Kaiga Kindjiria, Nigeria, on January 20, 2020, a female Boko Haram suicide bomber killed nine people. The most lethal attack in Chad's history took place on March 23 when a squad of Boko Haram terrorists killed 98 soldiers in Boma in the area surrounding Lake Chad. On November 25th, a maritime IED exploded, killing 4 Chadian soldiers and badly injuring 16 more. The Chadian army was the first to be subjected to this tactic (US Department of State, 2020). Another development involved the death of 26 soldiers who were ambushed by militants while on patrol in the troubled Lake Chad region. According to General, Azem Bermandoa Agouna, 26 soldiers of the Chadian army were killed in this attack; while 14 others were injured, including eight who had critical injuries. The attack happened on the Island of Lake Chad at Tchoukou Telia. Boko Haram and the Islamic State of West African Province had a conflict about who would control the area around Lake Chad. After the passing of Abubakar Shekau, the previous leader of Boko Haram, several members of the group crossed over to the ISWAP. Up to 30,000 killings have been reported by the UN since the start of Boko Haram's 12-year war, and the bloodshed has caused millions of people to flee their homes (DW News, 2020).

MALI

According to various sources, terrorist assaults around the Malian districts of Mopti, Bamba, and Gao resulted in 56 injuries and about 232 fatalities between April 2020 and December 2021 (Al Jazeera online, 2021). On July 21, there were reportedly complicated, simultaneous attacks that resulted in the deaths of 3 soldiers and 3 terrorists in various locations. On the premises of the Directorate of Material, Hydrocarbons and Transport of the Armed Forces (DMHTA) in Kati, the following day a car bomb also killed seven terrorists and one soldier. According to the army, these attacks match the hints that were previously identified and brought to light by effective services, which manifested in the suffering of the terrorist organizations in Mali. In the early hours of July 27, terrorists who were aiming their attacks at Kalumba, Savare, and Sokolo were repelled by the Armed Forces of Mali (FAMa). In Sokolo, south-central Mali, during the reported exchange of gunfire, 54 civilians and six soldiers were killed, while 25 soldiers were hurt. This assault was the result of a planned defense against the attackers, who had been located (Aurore, 2022). Almost every state in the Sahel has been experiencing a repeat of these attacks.

The deep impact the information and communication technology (the internet) has had in improving the efficiency of operations among these fundamentalist groups is, in the opinion of this study, at the heart of the terror tales. Terrorists typically reap the benefits of this technology's incremental advancements for their coordinated attacks, which are typically carried out smoothly. For instance, their meetings do not require or entail gathering of large numbers of people in a particular place to plan their onslaughts but the use of internet virtual packages such as the Webinar or Zoom. With this, just like any legitimate activity, they organize video clandestine meetings and determine where and when to strike. By and large, the skill to apply these technological packages has become commonplace in everyday life globally through social interactions.

As can be observed the extensive literature reviews, most comments centered on the rise of extreme violence in the Sahel as well as how the use of the ICT generally enhanced terrorist attacks. However, none has related this rise in attacks engendered by the abuse of Information Communication Technology to the Sahel region in particular. This study is meant to fill this gap in literature.

FRAMEWORK OF ANALYSIS

The theoretical frameworks adopted by this study are predicated on the Social Learning and Frustration-Aggression theories. These serve to embrace more dimensions to unravel some salient developments surrounding violent extremism. Social learning is applied here to explain how the internet influences the escalation of terrorism in the Sahel while the Frustration-Aggression approach traces the root-cause and sustenance of the scourge. The first approach, as developed by Albert Bandura, emphasizes the importance of observing and modeling the attitudes, behaviors, and emotional dispositions of others in order to learn by replicating what they do. As a result, it considers the ways that the combination of cognitive and environmental factors affects human behavior and learning. In the context of social learning, Bandura (1977) agrees with behaviorist learning theories such as classical conditioning and operant conditioning. In this case, however, two important concepts were added. The first is that behavior is learned from the environment through the process of observation. Second, mediating processes occur between inputs and responses. Accordingly, people pick up knowledge through observation, imitation, and reward. In line with these, the theory suggests that social learning occurs in four stages thus:

- Attention: During this phase, people need to focus on the conduct they are witnessing. This calls for attention to detail and focus on the behavior of the model.
- Retention: This suggests that people should be able to remember the actions they saw, which calls for memory storage and cognitive processing.
- Reproduction: At this stage, individuals try to imitate the actions they have already witnessed. This entails putting the observed behavior into practice and honing it until it is accurate.
- Motivation: In order for the learners to exhibit the internalized behavior, they must also have a motive. This could result in rewards or penalties, social acceptance or rejection, or other incentives (Evans, 2023).

Ultimately, instances of the social learning theory are widespread in daily life. A notable example can be observed in the actions of kids who have a tendency to watch and mimic family members, friends, celebrities, and fictional characters. In this sense, a youngster is likely to engage in an activity at any chance if they believe it would bring rewards. These days, social media provides many of these social learning opportunities, with people copying what they read and see online to emulate others. These recurrent behaviors are ultimately triggered by the drive to fit in. It is evident that criminal activity frequently arises when a person picks up these features via dynamic interpersonal interactions found in a violent setting. The social learning theory can also be used to study and explain how local recruits clamor to seek acceptability from politically or religiously motivated terrorist groups in the twenty-first century, when terrorist activities have grown endemic worldwide. Because of this, the leaders of these groups are bent on finding new members and figuring out ways to take advantage of others in order to aid in the elimination of those who either disagree with or oppose their organizational ideology. These actions are taken to promote unity in the goal of establishing a new, "pure" state (Hughbank & Hughbank, 2008).

With this knowledge, it is now more evident that Bandura's theory of social learning, which explains and affirms that the recent surge in the use of ICTs was complicit in the exacerbation and spread of terrorism throughout the Sahel. In this instance, sending live conversations, voice and video recordings and phone calls on various platforms have all been linked to use of social media. Moreover, this situation always lowers the likelihood that security personnel from various nations will be able to successfully monitor terrorist activities in the Sahel and address the challenge of extreme violence.

The second framework of analysis that needs to be elaborated in order to paint a clearer picture of root-cause of violence being addressed by this paper is the Frustration-Aggression theory. In the first place, frustration is mainly seen as a state that sets in if a goal-oriented act is delayed or truncated. Even when there are outside factors that limit the likelihood of reality, the initiative would nevertheless continue. Aggressive behavior under these frustrating circumstances manifests to the degree that the incitement and the goal accomplishment obstruction match. Conversely, aggression is the intentional infringement upon an organism or its substitute. Though it can be redirected at any other person or object, its primary focus is on the source of the frustration. The inhibition of aggressive behavior is a form of irritation in and of itself, and it can amplify aggressive impulses (Grimm, 2008). Frustration-aggression hypothesis was first propounded by John Dollard, Neal E. Miller et al (1939) and further developed to other dimensions in subsequent years. Basically, the theory holds that aggression is the result of blocking or frustrating a person's efforts to attain a goal (Friedman and Schustack, 1999). The idea aims to explain why individuals are disproportionately affected by the wrongdoings of others (Whitley and Kite, 2010). It also aims to provide an explanation for why violence occurs. In this sense, aggression is a result of frustration, according to John Dollard and colleagues, but the aggression shifts to a softer target when the source of the frustration is not addressed or challenged. For instance, a person may go home and vent his resentment and aggravation on family member(s) if he is insulted and humiliated at work by the boss but is unable to confront the situation for fear of losing his job. Revolutions and riots are also explained by this hypothesis. People may use violence as a way to release their pent-up frustration and rage (robertnielson.com/cause of violence/).

From the ongoing discourse, it will be right to infer that people who turn to terrorism exhibit significant levels of frustration. This notion is as a result of their apparent helplessness in the face of State authority, which drives them to act aggressively by destroying softer targets such as the masses of innocent people. This confirms the notion that aggressiveness shifts to an innocent victim when the source of the aggression cannot be confronted. Terrorists' worldwide attention-seeking tactics, which end in the loss of innocent lives and property, have never resolved any nation's political issues instead they have only made matters worse and led to chaos. One could cite the cases of Libya after Muammar Gaddafi, Iraq after Saddam Hussein, Somalia after Siad Barre, and so on. The humanitarian catastrophe brought on by poor administration has been blamed for the terrorist assaults currently consuming the African Sahel region. This suggests a high degree of discontent and the ensuing hostility. The trend

will continue to develop to uncontrollable proportions if it is not stopped in its tracks.

CONCEPTUALIZATION

E-Counterterrorism

Like e-governance, e-commerce, e-learning and so on, I hereby propose a new concept in counterterrorism to be branded E-Counterterrorism. The 'E' in any of these connotes 'electronic' because it involves the usage of information and communication technologies (ICTs) such as the internet, wide area networks (WAN) and mobile computing at various levels and for various purposes. E-counterterrorism is synonymous with Artificial Intelligence (AI), which is an aspect of information technology employed to perform multiple tasks. Granted that this strategy is being employed to fight terrorism in more advanced regions of the world over time, but that is not the case in the Sahel. More so, it has not been given a brand name and so may not boast of a life of its own. The coining of this concept is instigated by the challenge that the governments of Sahel nations have essentially been engulfed, to a large extent, in the sole use of a kinetic or military approach to fight violent insurgencies. As a departure from the status quo, it is meant to redirect their minds to pursue policies that promote and implement this strategy that is ultimately meant to complement military confrontation against terrorism for better results. Furthermore, it will aid the popular four elements of government's Counter-Terrorism Strategy namely, to prepare, to protect, to pursue and to prevent (Stevenage Borough Council, 2024). In practice, the e-counterterrorism is mainly geared towards applying these four elements, but among them, prevention appears to be of utmost importance since it is better than cure. As stated, this strategy is meant to be based on the smart usage of Artificial Intelligence as briefly elaborated below.

According to Duggal (2024) a computer program with artificial intelligence is able to learn and think. Anything that consists of a program carrying out a task that we would typically believe a human would accomplish might be considered artificial intelligence. The ability of artificial intelligence to effectively decrease errors and improve accuracy and precision is one of its most important advantages. Every choice made by AI is determined by a certain set of algorithms and previously acquired data. These mistakes can be minimized to null when properly coded. One of AI's most plausible advantages is that it tends to enable "smarter surveillance." The ability of AI to monitor and analyze massive volumes of data from numerous sources, including video feeds, sensors, and network traffic, enhances security and surveillance. AI technologies enable prompt reactions to avert disasters and improve safety wherever they occur by

being able to recognize faces, detect unusual activities, and identify potential security concerns in real time. For example, in smart cities and communities, AI-powered surveillance cameras monitor public spaces. These cameras can detect suspicious behavior, such as loitering in restricted areas or unattended bags, and alert security personnel. In addition to identifying known criminals and missing people, facial recognition technology helps law enforcement protect public safety. This proactive approach to security guarantees a safer living environment for people and aids in the prevention of crimes.

The primary impediment to this innovation is not the challenge of gathering and archiving data, but rather the identification of valuable patterns within the massive volume of data that is now being gathered. Massive data sets include patterns that are invisible to human eyes, but that AI can identify. In this sense, commonplace and seemingly insignificant data might become valuable with the application of AI technology. For example, based only on the Facebook postings that a person liked, researchers have taught computer models to predict a person's personality traits more correctly than their friends can (Wu, Kosinski and Stillwell 2015). AI can also be used to automatically look for software security holes, or "zero-day vulnerabilities". This can be carried out with malicious or legal purpose. Similar to how thieves look for unknown operating system weaknesses, software designers could utilize AI to test for security flaws in their product (Brundage et al. 2018). "Data poisoning" is a new attack vector that hostile actors could employ. Given that artificial intelligence (AI) learns from data, malicious actors may alter the training data set to give the AI the ability to perform whatever they want. "Adversarial examples" could offer an additional fresh method of assault. Adversarial examples are similar to optical illusions in that they involve manipulating input data in a way that would probably go unnoticed by humans but is intended to lead the AI to incorrectly classify the data. According to a widely conjectured scenario, a stop sign could be slightly changed so that the AI system in charge of an autonomous vehicle misinterprets it for a yield sign, which could have fatal consequences (Geng and Veerapaneni 2018).

With these functional innovations, it has become expedient that the Sahel governments should turn a new leaf and embrace the e-counterterrorism strategy to complement the onerous eradication of the terrorism from the region instead of relying heavily on a counter-productive measure such as arms combat without unraveling the background sources. In an attempt to buttress this assertion, it is necessary to consider the humongous amounts of state funds spent on procuring weapons to subdue terrorism. Relatively, it is believed that the implementation of e-counterterrorism is more cost-effective and reduces fiscal spending in this direction. For example, the data below shows military spending as regards

military equipment procurement budget between 2016 and 2022 in some terror-endemic states within the Sahel region.

Table 1: Terrorized Sahel Countries' Military Spending / Defense Budget (\$ Billion)

Year	Nigeria	% of GDP	Niger Republic	% of GDP	Burkina Faso	% of GDP	Chad	% of GDP	Mali	% of GDP
2022	3.11	0.64	0.24	1.66	0.56	3.09	0.36	2.93	0.52	2.83
2021	4.47	1.01	0.20	1.35	0.46	2.40	0.33	2.81	0.65	3.44
2020	2.57	0.63	0.24	1.75	0.38	2.20	0.32	3.01	0.59	3.43
2019	1.86	0.46	0.25	1.92	0.36	2.24	0.23	2.14	0.48	2.75
2018	2.04	0.51	0.23	1.79	0.31	1.91	0.25	2.30	0.48	2.82
2017	1.62	0.43	0.20	1.81	0.19	1.36	0.22	2.20	0.46	3.03
2016	1.72	0.43	0.17	1.60	0.15	1.17	0.31	3.04	0.36	2.59

Source: Macrotrends (2023)

The data above simply serves to elucidate how most countries in the Sahel are spending more on military arsenals than hitherto in the fight against wanton terrorism in their various domains, yet their citizens wallow in multidimensional poverty. A close perusal shows that the budget expenditures and their percentages in gross domestic product (GDP) of the concerned states have kept rising over the years while the wars against the insurgencies are far from being won. Even though it is considered essential that the government should fight to protect the territorial integrity of a state, but most of these funds could have been channeled towards addressing poverty that is the actual driver of the cleavages and change the life conditions of the populace for better. This calls for a radical change in strategy-implementation among the Sahel nations. That is why the paper strongly believes that e-counterterrorism appears a veritable antidote to help fight terrorism in all ramifications. This concept is therefore open to further research exploration, development and articulation.

METHODOLOGY

The paper relies on secondary sources of data collection including the Key Informant Interviews (KII). This method has been quite reliable in eliciting qualitative information from reliable sources such as government official documents, books, journal articles, newspapers, internet databases and so on. The information gathered will be analyzed via content analysis by leveraging on the quality of vast and accessible data. These are further used here to explain and validate the opinions presented by this paper while creating room for further research into the problem being addressed. Furthermore, the interviews conducted were structured in the bid to elicit valuable responses. Some of the key respondents were chosen for the reason that they lived or worked in a terror-

infested zone in Nigeria's northeastern region, notably Bornu state. Others were selected on the grounds that they are political leaders and scholars who have in-depth knowledge of terrorism around Africa and beyond. The choice of professors in the university social sciences is informed by their vast knowledge of social problems based on the research enterprise. Information derived aided the researcher to explain and analyze the findings of the study in detail. The three key interview questions were stated as follows:

- (1) What do you think is driving the escalation of extreme violence in the Sahel region, which has been reported to be astronomically high, lately?
- (2) As one of the major reasons for the increase, would a blockade on the use of social media help in reducing the perpetration of terrorism?
- (3) In your own opinion, what could be done to quickly reduce the rate of terrorist attacks in the Sahel region?

The above questions were, uniformly, posed to different respondents at different times. The interviews were conducted face-to-face since the respondents stayed in the same vicinity with the researcher. At the end of the exercise, only the key points of their responses are reported to conserve space in this paper.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

In an interview session on 20th November 2023 I had with Senator, Okechukwu Ezea of the current Nigerian National Assembly, on his position regarding the first question, he subtly submitted that the major reason for the upsurge of terrorism borders on the level of poverty in the Sahel due to sustained poverty occasioned by neglect by past weak leadership, which the present administration is poised to tackle. On the second question, he said that even though the widespread application of social media immensely contributes to smoother perpetration of violent attacks, it does not appear reasonable to stop its usage since it enhances the ease of general livelihood like any other technology. On the third question, Senator, Ezea maintained that terrorism could still be tackled effectively if the governments and their security agencies can think out of the box by, effectively, monitoring illegal arms and financial flows within the region by improving 'intelligence gathering' (Ezea, 2023- PC).

The next respondent, Mr. Japhet Ohaegbulem of Faculty of Veterinary Medicine, University of Nigeria, Nsukka was interviewed by me on 21st November 2023. He was chosen due to his long years of working at the

University of Maiduguri, Borno State and according to him, fled to the East due to Boko Haram attacks to stay alive. He restated almost what the former respondent said about the first and second questions but deviated a little on the third question when he submitted that some Islamic fundamentalists, on a wider scale, appear to regard and preach religious doctrines as a social competition, which eventually results in physical assaults that turn into general violence in most parts of northern Nigeria. So, this has psychological effect on some of its followers that advocate violence as a strategy for sociopolitical emancipation. Therefore, there should be a deliberate counter-education to disabuse the minds of the upcoming fundamentalists in addition to other measures being implemented (Ohagbulam, 2023-PC).

Subsequently, on 5th December 2023, Professor Leonard Ugwu of Department of Psychology, University of Nigeria, had this to say on the questions posed. ‘Terrorism in the recent parlance does not just happen but is triggered by unpalatable conditions people are subjected to over time, culminating into deprivation and poverty. These have translated into humanitarian crises in most West African states currently. To my understanding, there is essentially a strong link between the use of internet and the rise in modern terrorism anywhere, including the Sahel region. It is true that the social media has been grossly abused by the terrorists, it does not warrant its ban giving other benefits it engenders. Therefore, one of the best approaches to counterterrorism is the employment of internet computer technology, which could be used for different ‘proactive intelligence’ moves to check their excesses by discovering their modus operandi generally’ (Ugwu, 2023-PC).

The last respondent, Professor Gerald Ezirim of Political Science Department of the same University, was interviewed on 12th December 2023. He unequivocally, towed the same line of thought as regards the first and second questions but for the third, added that the proliferation of small and light weapons (SALWs) in the Sahel has been an important factor sustaining violent insurgencies in the region and needs to be urgently checkmated by the authorities, who seem overwhelmed by the volume of procurement of these illegal weapons. This problem was equally mentioned by the first respondent (Ezirim, 2023-PC).

At this point, it is pertinent to reiterate that all the respondents have a convergent opinion that the ICT is an important contributory factor in the escalation of terrorism in the Sahel. Invariably, this conforms to the hypothesis of this study. Also, by hinting that the violent attacks stem from the vestiges of bad governance, the onus of addressing it behooves on the various governments to turn a new leaf towards fair treatment of their citizens by running inclusive governance.

Table 2: List of Key Interviewees (Private Correspondence)

Name	Institution	Date	Designation
Senator, Okechukwu Ezea	Nigeria National Assembly, Abuja.	20 th Nov., 2023	Senator rep. Enugu North
Japhet O. Ohaegbulem	Faculty of Veterinary Medicine, University of Nigeria, Nsukka.	21 st Nov., 2023	Chief Lab. Technologist
Leonard Ugwu	Department of Psychology University of Nigeria, Nsukka.	5 th Dec., 2023	University Professor
Gerald E. Ezirim	Department of Political Science University of Nigeria, Nsukka.	12 th Dec., 2023	University Professor

The challenge that is being harped from the outset of this paper is the gruesome rise in incidences of terrorist onslaughts with high fatality rates ravaging across countries within the Sahel. To this end, the table below shows global rankings of some of these countries to attest to this claim.

Table 3: Sahel Terrorism Index / Ranking (by Country) 2018 - 2023

Country	2018-2019	Rank	2019-2020	Rank	2021-2022	Rank	2022-2023	Rank
Nigeria	8.597	3	8.314	3	8.233	6	8.065	8
Burkina Faso	5.418	27	6.755	12	8.270	4	8.564	2
Mali	6.653	13	7.049	11	8.152	7	8.412	4
Niger Repub.	5.596	23	5.617	24	7.856	8	7.616	10
Chad	4.762	38	4.829	34	6.379	19	6.168	19
Cameroon	6.620	15	6.627	13	7.432	11	7.347	11

Source: Institute of Economics and Peace – GTI. (Author’s Compilation)

The data above can attest to the claim that the Sahel region in sub-Saharan Africa has now become the epicenter of terrorism since the region accounted for more deaths by terrorism in 2022; even when South Asia, the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) are combined (GTI Report, 2022). Taking a look at the figures, even though Nigeria with a current index of 8.065 now ranks eighth from its third position in 2020, it still has not left the danger zone. In fact, current attacks in the country are more intensified from different dimensions and locations than hitherto. It simply depicts the astronomical rise of the scourge in other countries, especially Burkina Faso. The surprising jump by Burkina Faso from 27th in 2018 to the 2nd position and Mali now at 4th most

terrorized countries in the world have overtaken Nigeria’s erstwhile ranking. As it were, these now culminated to account for 43% of the world’s terrorism deaths as other Sahel countries’ terrorism indices sour (Green, 2023). With these trends, Niger Republic, Chad and Cameroon are equally and gradually coming closer to the top positions if terrorism is not checkmated in the near future. This can attest to the claim that terrorist incidence in the Sahel, which appears to be intractable, were instigated by other existential factors like bad governance that has engendered massive poverty in the region. To further buttress this, let us take a look at the death tolls in the top three most terrorized countries in the Sahel.

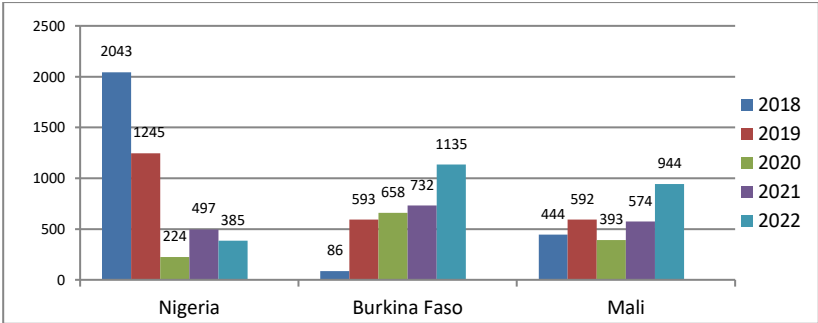
Table 4: Deaths by Terrorism in the Sahel (by country) 2018 - 2022

DATE	NIGERIA	Percentage Increase/ Decrease	BURKINA FASO	Percentage Increase/ Decrease	MALI	Percentage Increase/ Decrease
2018	2043	44.24	86	2.68	444	14.96
2019	1245	26.96	593	18.51	592	19.95
2020	448	9.70	658	20.54	393	13.25
2021	497	10.76	732	22.85	594	20.02
2022	385	8.34	1135	35.42	944	31.82
Total	4618	100	3204	100	2967	100

Source: Institute of Economics and Peace – GTI (2022) -Author’s Compilation

As can be observed, deaths by terrorism in Nigeria fell significantly even though its total is, relatively, higher than those of other countries at 4618 within the period. This reduction invariably resulted in her being ranked 8th in the 2022 world terrorism index. On the other hand, the fatality rates of Burkina Faso and Mali have been rising exponentially within the period. For a clearer picture, the same data are represented in the bar chart below.

Figure 1: Deaths by Terrorism in the Sahel (by country) 2018 - 2022



Source: Institute of Economics and Peace – GTI (2022). Designed by Author

CONCLUSION

As found by the study so far, the upsurge of terror attacks in the Sahel has become overbearing to the extent many people die in quick successions as a result and hundreds of thousands are displaced along the line. In furtherance to this assertion, it is evident that the rankings of major counties in the Sahel by the Global Terrorism Index between 2018 and 2023 drive home the fact that the Sahel region is heading towards a political disaster if nothing is done to reduce this trend. According to this paper, it has become more obvious that the insurgent terrorist groups' passionate use and application of information and communication technology or the internet has contributed to the rise in terrorism that is currently wreaking havoc in the Sahel region. The ease with which these assaults can be carried out without being dictated has been linked to the challenges faced in combating terrorism, despite the fact that pundits have attributed it to poor governance as a major driver. To make matters worse, the governments of the Sahel have continued to tackle the security issues with a subpar strategy. This is demonstrated by the use of only deadly military force to quell the attacks, which seems to have emboldened the militants operating in the majority of the region more to keep radicalizing the situation. However, a lot needs to be done towards putting good governance in place of a bad one that has been severely orchestrated to be at the center of these insurgencies and extreme violence claiming thousands of innocent lives as reported across countries in the Sahel. It is therefore pertinent to aver at this point in time that all hands should be on deck, in all the counties concerned, to forge alliances among themselves to combat the hydra-headed terrorist attacks without further delays using modern approaches as proffered by this study.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In the first place, a coordinated cooperation of all Sahel regional governments, (military or civilian) is advocated in an effort to eradicate terrorism in the region. In this spirit, monitoring social media transactions of any kind with AI's e-counterterrorism is recommended in line with legitimate global practices obtainable in more developed nations. This deserves serious consideration since it offers the only alternative window to arrest the perennial situation. As a result of the Sahelian authorities' apparent weak stance to this important problem bordering on ICT, the terrorists and other criminal elements have been abusing its various applications to perpetrate their terrorist acts.

Furthermore, it is past time for the political leaders of the Sahelian countries to begin attending to the needs of their citizens rather than amassing illicit wealth from the region's riches while the vast majority of people live in abject poverty. According to the paper, this is the primary driver of violent extremism in the area, and the governments' attention to these irregularities is the major way to mitigate the problem. As earlier postulated, it is better to fight and reduce the level of poverty in the region than utilizing the available financial resources to combat terrorism with the huge amounts spent on weapons procurements.

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