



# Foreign Terrorist Fighters in the Sahel-Sahara Region of Africa:

Recommendations for stemming a long-lasting threat

## Summary Overview

The phenomenon of foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) poses a serious threat to global peace, security and stability; particularly in various African countries. Analysts have cautioned about the relocation of FTFs following the collapse of the so-called Islamic State in Syria and Iraq (ISIS) Caliphate, including to terrorism-affected countries across Africa. This poses grave implications for these countries and their respective regions.

This policy paper presents options and recommendations for addressing the threat of FTFs in Africa's Sahel-Sahara region. It is based on findings from a field study conducted in Tunisia, Mali and Niger. The findings show that the flow of FTFs in this region is likely to be long-lasting, with long-term and near-permanent impacts from a security and socio-economic perspective.

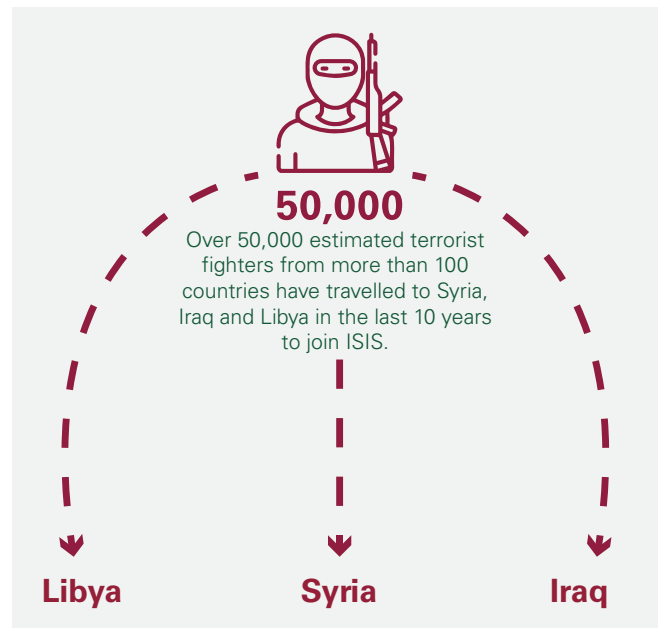
FTF operations affect trade and economic activities, undermine investor confidence, and threaten the psycho-social wellbeing of people residing in these countries. Despite efforts by governments and international partners to address the phenomenon, these threats persist. This points to a need for a new approaches to deal with the FTF situation in the Sahel-Sahara.

## Introduction

FTFs are individuals or groups who travel to conflict zones to engage in terrorist acts. Estimates suggest that over 50,000 terrorist fighters from more than 100 countries have travelled to Syria, Iraq and Libya in the last 10 years to join ISIS. Over 7,000 foreign fighters went to Syria and Iraq from North Africa, and approximately 5,000 European citizens joined the terrorist groups in Iraq and Syria.

The influx of FTFs in conflict-driven areas further complicates the terrorism landscape and should be addressed to minimise the spread of terrorism and violent extremism. As aptly pointed out by the United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism (UNOCT), FTFs who '... remain in conflict zones, return to their countries of origin or nationality, or relocate to third countries, continue to pose a serious threat to international peace and security'<sup>i</sup>.

Similarly, in 2018, and again recently in 2020, the African Union (AU) Peace and Security Council (PSC) expressed '... deep concern over the growing influx of foreign terrorist fighters from outside the continent and the threat they are increasingly posing to peace and security in



Africa'<sup>ii</sup>. The AU subsequently requested<sup>iii</sup> the AU Commission, African Centre for the Study and Research on Terrorism (ACSRT/CAERT) and AFRIPOL to develop a comprehensive framework for countering FTFs.

FTFs are present in the Sahel-Sahara region and the Horn of Africa, while some reports mention<sup>iv</sup> their presence in other parts of the continent. For countries bordering the Sahel-Sahara region, the threat that FTFs pose compounds national and regional security challenges. In particular, the return and relocation of FTFs threatens to

boost the operational capability of local terrorist groups and affiliates. FTFs also have tremendous knowledge in the manufacture of improvised explosive devices (IEDs), for instance.

The upsurge of FTFs across the continent has been especially prominent in the Sahel and Central African regions, and more recently in Mozambique (in Southern Africa). This means that no region in Africa is spared of this menace. FTFs bring fighting and field experience with them, in addition to their technical expertise in the manufacture of all types of IEDs. FTFs' military experience often acts as a force multiplier to the local terrorist activities and their choice of tactics can fuel the escalation of national conflicts across borders.

■ **In recent times, FTFs have established, sustained and expanded terrorism and other forms of violent conflict across the Sahel Sahara region's remote and poorly controlled frontiers.**

More than 5, 000 FTFs are believed to be fighting in the Sahel, mostly based in southern Libya. The increased number of returning FTFs, along with the elevated frequency of terrorist acts, represents a major challenge for national and regional security.

The evolving threat of FTFs has elicited numerous global, regional, and national responses. For instance, United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolutions 2178 (2014) and 2396 (2017) established and reinforced international obligations related to border security and information sharing. This includes the use of passenger name record (PNR) and advance passenger information (API), biometrics, and watchlists. Resolution 2396, in particular, calls for greater judicial cooperation, prosecution, rehabilitation, and reintegration strategies for FTFs and accompanying family members.

In an effort to implement these international obligations, Sahel-Saharan states have put in

place measures to prevent, disrupt, prosecute, rehabilitate, and even reintegrate FTFs. However, the phenomenon persists with increasing sophistication. This adds urgency to the need to clearly understand how the threat of FTFs can be addressed; also as part of broader efforts to prevent and combat terrorism and violent extremism in the Sahel-Sahara.

In the lead-up to the upcoming AU Assembly of Heads of State and Government Extraordinary Session on Terrorism and Unconstitutional Changes of Government, this paper provides AU member states with policy recommendations on some of the key issues, as these states seek to address the flow and return of FTFs in the region. Following a brief overview of the phenomenon and the factors that drive it in the Sahel-Sahara region, the policy paper examines state responses to addressing the challenge. It then articulates policy options based on findings from a field study conducted in Tunisia, Mali and Niger. Commissioned by the ACSRT/CAERT, this research focused on the impact of FTFs on terrorism in the Sahel-Sahara region.

### **FTFs in the Sahel-Sahara region: an overview**

■ **The phenomenon of FTFs in the Sahel-Saharan region can be traced to the early 1990s, when many 'mujahedeen' (fighters who fought in the Afghan War from 1979 to 1989), returned to their various countries of origin.**

It is estimated that hundreds of Africans were mobilised and deployed to Afghanistan. Here, they participated in the guerrilla war against the then Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), after its invasion of the country to defend the communist proxy government in Kabul in 1979. The departure of Soviet troops in February 1989, however, saw many foreign fighters returning to their countries of origin. Others joined the group, Maktab al Khidamat (MAK, or the 'Bureau of Services'). Founded by Osama bin Laden and

Abdullah Azzam, MAK was subsumed into al-Qaeda in 1988.

■ Many of the foreign fighters who returned to their home countries founded terrorist networks or cells which gave rise to organisations such as al-Qaeda and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

A substantial number of these Soviet-Afghan War veterans also created or joined affiliate terrorist organisations in their respective countries, with the intent of overthrowing governments.

The most recent wave of FTF incursion in the region occurred after the fall of ISIS in 2017. When the Syrian conflict began in 2011, several foreign fighters, including some from Africa and Western Europe, travelled to join ISIS. Many of them were positioned at the core of ISIS' identity, its trajectory, and its shifting fortunes. During the interviews conducted for this paper, it was indicated that some returnees acquired basic field experience to plan and manage terror attacks, provide training in handling sophisticated artillery, as well as manufacture explosive devices and weapons. Others have shaped a new generation FTFs, including re-organising and reviving sleeper cells. This development further influenced the dynamics and rise of terrorism in the Sahel-Saharan region.

In Libya for instance, it is reported<sup>v</sup> that over 3,000 foreign fighters in ISIS-affiliated local groups are exploiting the fragile political situation to establish a strong foothold. Many of the former al-Qaeda-affiliated groups have also joined forces with ISIS, causing more havoc.

The affiliation of FTFs to these home-grown terrorist groups has strengthened the network and coordination of terrorist groups across the region. It has also led to an emulation of the ISIS brand of brutal terror tactics.

■ In the Sahel, the security situation is getting worse as conflicts driven by terrorist groups, insurgents and local militias spread across Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger.

Strong social and ethnic connections among countries in the region further help to mobilise fighters beyond national borders. Some of the militants fighting in the Sahel region and Lake Chad Basin (LCB) – with groups such as the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam waal Muslimeen (JNIM), Boko Haram and Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) – are believed to be foreign fighters linked to al-Qaeda and ISIS.

■ The porosity of the borders within the African continent also makes it easy for terrorist fighters to move from one country to another.

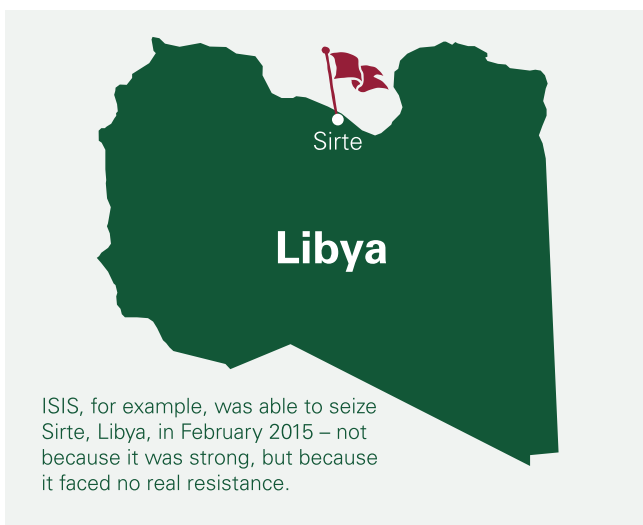
For instance, JNIM or ISGS fighters are easily able to move across the Sahel-Saharan region and beyond.

Indeed, evidence suggests<sup>vi</sup> that the presence of FTFs in the region has bolstered the strength and operational capacity of terrorist groups. In January 2020, the former UN Special Representative and Head of the UN Office for West Africa and the Sahel (UNOWAS), Dr Mohamed Ibn Chambas, reported to the UNSC<sup>vii</sup> that the rise of terrorism in the Sahel region and West Africa was unprecedented.

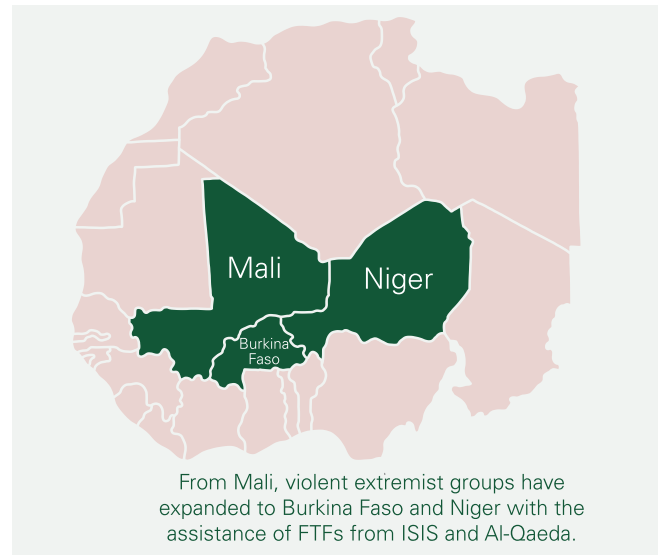
Apart from the worsening humanitarian situation, the geographic focus of terrorist attacks had shifted eastwards from Mali to Burkina Faso and was increasingly threatening coastal states in West Africa. By all indications, the influx of FTFs within and outside the continent has not only transformed the terrorism landscape, but also poses a significant threat to the stability of individual states.

## Factors that motivate the flow and return of FTFs in the Sahel-Sahara

Several factors account for the high number of FTFs in the region. Three of these will be explored here. The first is the security vacuum and a conducive political context. A series of political upheavals and regime changes seemed to have helped create fertile ground for exploitation by Al-Qaeda and ISIS affiliate groups. The security apparatus and governance structures of some countries were largely ineffective for an extended period of time. In several contexts, state authority was also weakened and became fragmented. The growing political stalemate in Libya, and fragile political transitions in some Sahel-Sahara states, emboldened several terrorist groups both within and outside the continent. These groups were able to operate without much resistance from state actors. ISIS, for example, was able to seize Sirte, Libya, in February 2015 – not because it was strong, but because it faced no real resistance.



Other cases of political and security turmoil in the Sahel have further motivated FTFs to reinforce the capacity of home-grown terrorist groups. In Mali, the weakness of the state following the Tuareg rebellion in 2012, and the subsequent political instability, is largely blamed for the current security situation across the Sahel. From Mali, violent extremist groups have expanded to Burkina Faso and Niger with the assistance of FTFs from ISIS and Al-Qaeda.



The second factor is the presence of ISIS and Al-Qaeda-affiliated jihadist groups in the Sahel-Sahara region. Examples of these groups include Ansar Sharia in Libya, the Libyan Islamist Fighting Group (LIFG), ISGS, and JNIM. The leadership and the militant base of these groups include veterans from Afghanistan's anti-Soviet jihad period. The existence of these groups has facilitated the influx of FTFs from Syria and Iraq, some of whom were originally from North Africa. For instance, most of the surviving African citizens who joined ISIS in 2011 have returned, with some joining local extremist groups.

Lastly, a host of vulnerabilities have also facilitated the easy incursion and rise of FTFs in the region. These include long and porous borders; large numbers of loosely governed or ungoverned spaces; corruption; a lack of rule of law; marginalisation; deep-seated socio-economic grievances; impunity of the political elite; and pervasive perceptions of injustice.

■ **The exploitation of these vulnerabilities has provided sanctuary and safe havens for terrorist development, plotting, and violent activities.**

In Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso, these vulnerabilities largely account for the growing influx of militants from other parts of Africa who are fighting under the umbrella of ISGS and JNIM.

## Existing responses

The increasing threat of FTFs in the Sahel-Sahara region has elicited some responses from the African Union Commission (AUC), Regional Economic Communities (RECs) and Regional Mechanisms (RMs), national governments, and international development partner organisations.

Broadly, the approach has seen a combination of military (hard) approaches and non-military (soft) approaches. These approaches are generally determined by the human, financial, moral, and political resources to generate an effective response.

### ■ The balance between hard and soft power is key for effective impact.

The military approach usually follows the sequence of monitoring, arresting, following up, pre-empting, stopping, and disrupting the base, flow and return of FTFs. Many countries in the region have also strengthened border security and information sharing.

The non-military approach involves educational, cultural, social, and economic interventions. Many of these are targeted at preventing the youth from being enticed by FTFs. Soft approaches also target major and minor drivers of the phenomenon by addressing issues such as unresolved grievances, bad governance, localised conflicts, incomplete national reconciliation, personal trauma and feeling of injustice. The intention is to also address the stimulus incentives that drive would-be FTFs.

Furthermore, African countries have reformed their laws to deal with FTFs through arrest, prosecution, and the conviction of perpetrators. In Tunisia, for example, the legal system was successfully employed to dismantle the base of FTFs operations through strong cooperation between the government, security forces and

the judiciary. This cooperation drew on a law introduced in 2015 (Law 26), which deals with Tunisians who travel to any part or region of the world to join any terrorist group. The punitive nature of this law has arguably helped to reduce the number of Tunisians who leave the country to join terrorist groups.

Most of the countries in the Sahel-Sahara have also continued to implement the United Nations global strategy on counter-terrorism. By domesticating the global strategy through national counter-terrorism policies, they are dealing with all forms of terrorism to collectively prevent and combat the threat posed by FTFs.

## Challenges to addressing FTFs

Despite efforts to combat FTFs in the Sahel-Sahara, there have been many challenges and pitfalls. For example, due to the geographic vastness of many of countries in the Sahel-Sahara, especially Niger and Mali, large areas lack a state presence. These areas then serve as so-called 'free zones' or 'ungoverned spaces', where FTFs can operate alongside local terrorist groups.

Porous borders enable unfettered entry into many countries in the Sahel for FTFs. This enables them to exploit existing socio-economic and political challenges to pursue their agenda. Human rights abuses and extrajudicial killings by some elements of defence and security agencies have further worsened matters, as such trends enable FTFs and their affiliate groups to mobilise local support in pursuit of their objectives.

Another crucial challenge is the deficit in inter-governmental and inter-agency collaboration in fighting the phenomenon. Although security agencies are an integral part of the fight against FTFs, no one institution can combat this fight alone. The nature and dynamics of these threats call for a dual 'whole-of-the-government' and 'whole-of-the-society' approach. However, complementarity and synergy between soft

and hard approaches continue to be weakened by inadequate cooperation among the relevant stakeholders; along with multiple, uncoordinated initiatives to combat the threat.

The inability or failure to accurately identify and disrupt the financing or funding networks of FTFs has also been a major challenge. Many experts interviewed indicated that the strategies used to identify and disable the financial outflows that support FTFs remain ineffective. In some contexts, this is due to the complicity of security agencies and political actors in the money-laundering business. There are also allegations that some politicians and businessmen/women use the services of FTFs for their clandestine activities including for example masterminding terrorists attacks to cause disaffection for the ruling government, engaging in the trading of illicit drugs among many others.

Moreover, anecdotal evidence suggests that the majority of states in the Sahel-Sahara have weak capacity in terms of their legal regimes for prosecuting, rehabilitating, and reintegrating FTFs. This leaves a big vacuum in the legal pathway for dealing with FTFs.

## **1.5 Conclusion and recommendations**

The phenomenon of FTFs in the Sahel-Sahara region is a complex phenomenon with grave security and socio-economic implications for the region and the rest of Africa. The flow of FTFs is likely to be long-lasting, and the impact on the region is expected to be devastating and near permanent. FTFs operations have also affected trade and economic activities and foreign investor confidence in the region, and elevates psycho-social stress among people residing in these countries. Despite efforts by government and other international agencies to address the menace, a combination of political, geographic and socio-economic factors has conspired to make success rather elusive.

There is, therefore, a need for a new and better approach to deal with the FTF phenomenon in the Sahel-Sahara region. Based on the foregoing analysis, the following recommendations are intended to help mitigate, if not eliminate, the increasing threat of FTFs in the Sahel-Sahara region:

1. Sahel-Sahara countries should strengthen inter-agency and inter-governmental collaboration and cooperation in combatting the FTF phenomenon. This should be based on mutual trust and a common vision.
2. International partners should share with African states the lists of their nationals who have become FTFs to help identify these individuals when they enter the continent.
3. Intelligence gathering and timely information sharing on the activities of FTFs should be improved significantly. It may be necessary to establish new agencies or units where they do not exist, particularly among countries in the Sahel Sahara region;
4. Bilateral, regional, inter-regional and continental mechanisms, operating in subsidiarity, cooperation and mutually reinforcing complementarity, are key. The AU should provide direction and leadership through the ACSRT, AFRIPOL and Committee of Intelligence and Security Services of Africa (CISSA);
  - Member states and relevant institutions should adopt a human rights and rule-of-law-based approach in all measures aimed at countering the threats and challenges posed by FTFs. Security cannot be achieved at the expense of human rights and the rule of law.
5. Member states should reinforce rule of law; uphold individual and collective freedoms;

fight corruption, social inequality and unemployment; and eliminate sources of funding for terrorism.

- Member states, RECs and RMs should encourage exchanges between border communities, and help initiate economic projects (including micro-enterprises, small industries and artisanal manufacturing) to improve their standard of living; and
  - Member states should develop and implement gender-sensitive reintegration and rehabilitation programmes for returning FTFs.
6. Member states should prioritise the identification of a list of persons who travelled to conflict zones to fight as FTFs. There is an accompanying need to identify who left the so-called caliphate, find out where they have gone, assess the risks they pose, and take the appropriate action to protect the public from harm.
  7. In that sense, the AU – through its specialised institutions, namely ACSRT, AFRIPOL and CISSA – should initiate contacts with Iraqi and Syrian Intelligence Agencies to gain access to their lists of FTFs who are likely to make their way into Africa.
    - There is an urgent need to promote enhanced cooperation between ACSRT, AFRIPOL, INTERPOL and other relevant institutions on data exchange and access to information regarding FTFs.
  8. In the interim, the Sahel-Sahara region should step up the monitoring and control of borders, particularly in coastal countries, in line with decisions of the 1040th meeting of the AU PSC<sup>viii</sup>.



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## Endnotes

- i See for example United Nations (UN) Office of Counter-Terrorism (2020). Foreign terrorist fighters. <https://www.un.org/counterterrorism/foreign-terrorist-fighters>, accessed 30 October 2020.
- ii See the Communiqué of the Peace and Security Council at its 812th Meeting 23 November 2018, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia PSC/PR/COMM.DCCCXII. Woldemichael, S. (2019). Africa needs a continental strategy on foreign terrorist fighters. <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/africa-needs-a-continental-strategy-on-foreign-terrorist-fighters> and Communiqué PSC/PR/COMM.(CMLVII) at its 957th Meeting 20 October 2020. Addis Ababa. <https://caert.org.dz>
- iii *ibid*
- iv See for example 'How 'foreign' are foreign terrorist fighters in Africa?' <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/how-foreign-are-foreign-terrorist-fighters-in-africa> accessed 12/05/2022. Also Africa needs a continental strategy on foreign terrorist fighters. <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/africa-needs-a-continental-strategy-on-foreign-terrorist-fighters>
- v See for instance <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/middle-east/2016/03/09/Italy-says-ISIS-has-5-000-fighters-in-Libya>
- vi Barrett, R., Foggett, S., and Salyk-Virk, M. (2017). Beyond the Caliphate: Foreign Fighters and the Threat of Returnees. Soufan Centre. See 'Foreign Fighters: An Updated Assessment of the Flow of Foreign Fighters into Syria and Iraq', The Soufan Group, December 2015
- vii See UN News. 'Unprecedented terrorist violence' in West Africa, Sahel region. <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/01/1054981>, accessed 20 March 2020.
- viii See <https://www.peaceau.org/en/article/communique-of-the-1040th-meeting-of-the-peace-and-security-council-of-the-african-union-held-on-22-october-2021-at-ministerial-level-on-the-report-of-the-chairperson-of-the-commission-on-continental-efforts-in-preventing-and-combating-of-terrorism-and-v#:~:text=Communiqu%C3%A9%20of%20the%201040th%20meeting%20of%20the%20Peace,Combating%20of%20Terrorism%20and%20Violent%20Extremism%20in%20Africa>



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