VIOLENT EXTREMISM IN MALI'S SAHEL REGION

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The Sahel is one of Africa's most unstable regions, with an alarming increase in terrorist attacks on civilians, government and foreign forces alike. The fragility of the geographical location, ongoing social conflicts, the spread of poverty and unemployment, and the exacerbation of religious extremism are regional factors allowing terrorist groups to bolster their presence and operations while making it difficult to control and combat them.

The Most Dangerous

Mali's atmosphere is a breeding ground for extremist and violent organisations, and Mali is one of the world's most dangerous countries. Despite the United Nations' and France's backing of the Malian government in combating these terrorist groups, no genuine stability appears on the horizon, and the security situation threatens the state's survival as well as the entire area.

Internal turmoil, long-standing ethnic and sectarian disputes, particularly in the north-south region, as well as rebel groups demanding independence from the government and claiming autonomy in northern Mali, are all linked to terrorism in the country. These factors allowed terrorist groups to establish themselves in the depths of society, drawing power and survival from the escalation of these issues.

The terrorist threat in Mali dates back to 2003 when an Algerian terrorist group known as the "Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat" began operating in the north in order to obtain access to other parts of the country. The group rebranded themselves "Al-Qaeda Organization in the Islamic Maghreb" in 2007 after declaring allegiance to Al-Qaeda. In 2012, Al-Qaeda allied with Tuareg rebels against the Mali government, resulting in the rise of other armed groups, such as "Ansar Eldeen Group," the majority of which are Tuareg .

Fundamentalism has dominated intercommunal disputes in northern Mali since 2012, has been linked to numerous terrorist attacks in central Mali, and has extended to Burkina Faso and Niger. These groups seek to spread sectarian and ethnic turmoil from time to time in order to open new fronts of conflict, aggravate the security situation, and assist themselves in controlling and expanding power by exploiting latent ethnic animosities and the absence of the state in the periphery.

Extremism on the Rise

Political, economic, social, religious, and demographic problems have plagued the Malian society, all of which have contributed to the rise and spread of violent extremism in the country. The most serious of these issues are:

1- Abject Poverty

   Though Mali is one of the richest African countries in terms of mineral and agricultural resources, its people have not benefited from these riches which has not been invested in development as the majority of the country's 20 million inhabitants remain quite poor. Terrorist organisations take advantage of the public's desire for money in order to recruit new members and expand their ranks of gunmen. Many unemployed or low-paid young people join these organisations to meet their necessities ,but in exchange, they are subjected to brainwashing, which converts them into dangerous extremists.

2- Grievances Against the State

   Many civilians hold grudges against the government, owing to the deterioration of services or lack of access to them, such as education, security, health care, and decent livelihood, as well as being treated badly by officials such as water and forest officials, district heads, heads of departments, and judges. Shepherds and peasants frequently complain of repression, brutality, frequent arrests, large fines, expensive taxes, and terrible punishments for non-payment of taxes and fines; the family's head is sometimes thrown into the blazing sun to pay the fine. These circumstances have produced dissatisfaction with the state, prompting individuals to join extremist groups.

3- Natural Resources

   A scarcity of natural resources is a nightmare that afflicts the lives of millions of people in these countries as agriculture, fishing, and livestock provide income for around 80% of the population. Due to a scarcity of resources, bloodshed has

erupted amongst villages vying for water and pasture. Meanwhile, extremist groups are rushing to seize control of these resources, administer them, and profit off the public's desire for them to impose specific obligations, such as joining them and obeying their commands. When a family's head of household is unable to feed his children, he is forced to accept the terms of these organisations, which have evolved into organized shadow governments that provide basic services to the populace and, in some situations, act as if they were the official government.

4- Arrests

Some residents in Mali complain of ill-treatment at the hands of defence and security forces, including being repeatedly arrested and held in pretrial detention for months, if not years, prompting them to seek refuge in extremist groups after their release, strengthening the influence of these groups and increasing the number of their members.

5- The Media

Terrorist groups do not rely solely on military force to achieve their objectives; rather, they are eager to use modern communication technologies, particularly the internet and social networking sites, to promote their ideas, reach the largest possible audience, obtain material and moral support, and expand their membership. With the movies and audio recordings that they publish on these sites, these groups attempt to malignantly influence the public. In this region, these approaches have contributed to inciting violence and hatred, spreading rumours, and causing confusion and instability.

Consequences of Extremism

The Mali community has been subjected to ongoing hardships as a result of the continued spread of extremist groups in the region, which has affected various aspects of life as follows:

- ### Deterioration of Security

  As a result of a surge in ethnic conflicts and terrorist attacks that victimize innocent people, the security situation in northern, central, and southern Mali has dramatically deteriorated, putting the population's lives and property at jeopardy. Famines have spread in some regions due to human kidnapping, livestock theft and sale, the spread of the drug and arms trade, crops being burned in fields and

granaries, ploughing machines being destroyed in some areas, causing poverty, and the prices of basic food commodities skyrocketing to the point where the population could not afford them. Because of thefts and repeated attacks on crops, animals, and private property, wealthy families have become drastically impoverished. Some terrorist groups have been able to take advantage of these circumstances. In 2017, they attempted to take control of entire villages, and this situation continues to this day.

- **Awkward Development**
  It is natural for every country's progress to be hampered by insecurity. In a country like Mali, where deadly conflicts and terrorist attacks have raged for years, development possibilities must dwindle and essential services must be curtailed, particularly in areas held by these groups. Many vital service sectors in Mali were destroyed, including telephone networks, highways, and transportation traffic. Royalties on land and river transportation were enforced, and traffic control procedures were intensified to collect these royalties.

- **Social Disintegration**
  One of the key reasons for the disintegration of the social fabric in the Sahel region was violent extremism because of migration and the search for resources, extremist group activity, the complex security situation, and population attempts to flee areas of armed conflict. Because of internal migration and the hunt for safer regions, the population of certain large cities, such as Bamako, Segou, and Mopti has doubled. Due to the influx of tens of thousands of Malians crossing the border and seeking asylum in neighboring countries such as Algeria and Mauritania, North African countries have faced demographic issues.

- **Deteriorating Education**
  The education system in Mali is in serious decline; many schools have closed their doors to students as a result of terrorist groups' opposition to the French formal educational system and of these groups' acts of terrorism. According to reports, 700 schools in central Mali, the Mopti region, and the Segou and Niafunke regions of Timbuktu have been closed as a result of violent extremism.

- **Self-Defense Groups**
  With the growing threats of extremist groups in the Sahel region and Mali, some communities were forced to form volunteer teams and armed groups for self-defence. However, internal conflicts erupted between these groups in open areas,

such as Country, Madenty Nyono, and Macina in the Segou and in communities throughout the delta region, resulting in increased unrest and anarchy.

- **Religious Extremism**
  Some extremist groups in Mali such as Ansar Eldeen Group demanded independence from the state government, the establishment of a Sharia state in the north, and the open implementation of Sharia law; they continued their bloody attacks under the guise of enforcing Sharia.

Conclusion

The causes and repercussions of extremism in Mali cannot be exhaustively examined in this review, but the pressing issues that have been raised here call for the development of comprehensive measures to resolve the crisis. The solution must not rely solely on security grounds; there must be a series of initiatives addressing the various root causes of the conflict, including economic and fundamentalist issues, as well as the importance of coming up with more creative skills to combat internal rebellion, end tribal and disputes and community conflicts, attempt to restore stability, and pay attention to improving relations between the population and the state, ensuring unity, and raising morale.