



MILITARY MEN RESET RELATIONS IN BURKINA FASO

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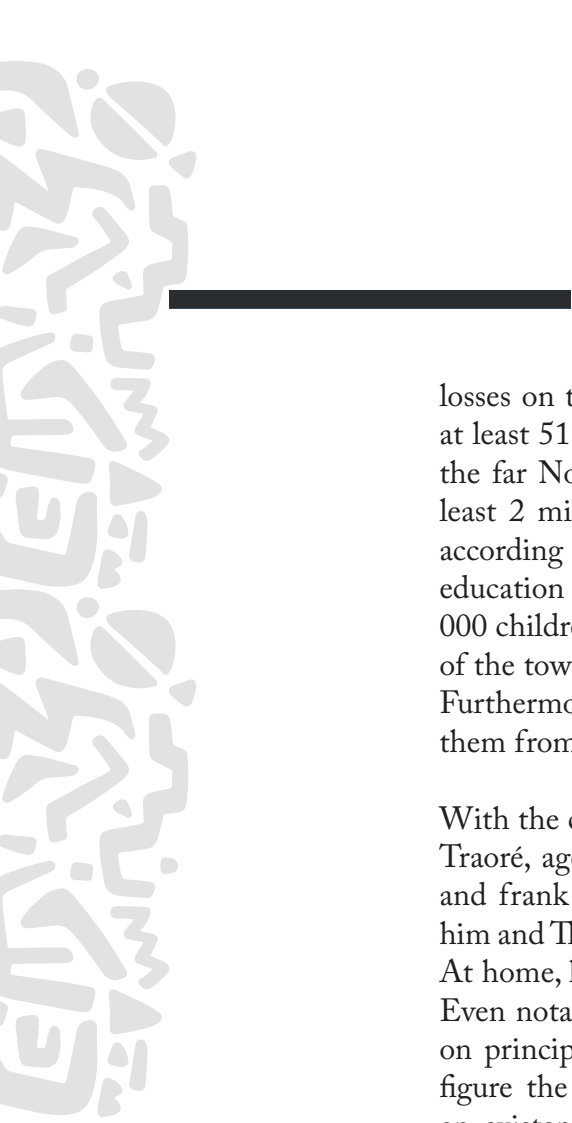
INTRODUCTION

Since 2016, Burkina Faso has been engulfed by extremist violence. This crisis has progressively extended with at least 40% of Burkina Faso territory under the control of different factions of the Islamic State in the Sahel and Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin (JNIM). Against the backdrop of this progressively deteriorating security situation, the country recorded two coup d'états in 2022 which further cast a shadow on the path to a stable democratic society. In January 2022, Lieutenant Colonel Damiba overthrew President Kaboré – the first democratically elected civilian President in the country's history – citing the latter's incapacity to resolve the crisis only to be overthrown by Captain Traoré eight (8) months later in November 2022.

When Damiba deposed Kaboré, he instituted the Patriotic Movement for the Safeguard and Restoration (MPSR) and his early leftist discourse galvanised support across the country. However, this rhetoric was not reflected in his political actions in the months that followed. His suspected growing ties with the fallen regime of Blaise Compaoré and the continued deterioration of the security situation led to his downfall.¹ On 30 September, Captain Ibrahim Traoré, who was a member of Damiba's MPSR took power claiming that Damiba had derailed from their common initial goal of restoring the integrity of the territory, 40% of which was controlled by violent extremist groups. It is important to note that both coups enjoyed public support including from civil society organisations who had worked assiduously in 2014 to oust a 27-year regime in favour of constitutional order. Demonstrations demanding that Damiba step down were already underway in several major cities across the country during the months preceding Traoré's coup with public support for the counter coup also expressed on the streets of major cities across the country.

Over the past year and under the military, the security situation has further deteriorated drastically. While Captain Traoré has been able to reconquer a few jihadist-occupied towns, they continue to sustain major

1. Damiba brought Blaise Compaoré back to Burkina Faso to initiate a national dialogue despite the latter being found guilty in a military court and condemned to life in prison for the 1987 killing of Thomas Sankara. Compaoré had fled to Côte d'Ivoire since his removal from power in 2014 and the Burkinabe government had requested his extradition to face the charges against him before Damiba came to power.



losses on the battlefield. The most recent major loss includes the killing of at least 51 gendarmes in an ambush near Deou in the Oudalan Province in the far North last week. This extremist conflict has internally displaced at least 2 million people causing a serious humanitarian crisis. For instance, according to the Ministry of Education, at the end of 2022, over 22% of education institutions were closed due to the insecurity putting at least 51 000 children out of school. Famine and disease are killing hundreds in some of the towns under terrorist blockade where humanitarian aid cannot reach. Furthermore, the terrorists have recently begun to target civilians to deter them from supporting the government.

With the country continuing to face an escalating terrorist threat, President Traoré, aged just 34, has taken a more revolutionary approach. His direct and frank statements have led some Burkinabe to draw parallels between him and Thomas Sankara, the 1983–1987 revolutionary leader of the country. At home, his government enjoys popular support especially from the youth. Even notable civil society organisations which condemned the coup d'états on principle have come around to the idea that Traoré might just be the figure the country needs in this moment.² This coup d'état is framed as an existential response to the dire security situation. It is simultaneously articulated as a sovereignty restoration and a decolonial struggle. Traoré's regime has privileged the use of local forces and resources in the fight against insecurity as opposed to a reliance on external forces. It has also adopted a diplomatic position that challenges France's hegemony in the country and looks to build closer ties with Russia.

Commentaries and media reports discussing these recent political developments in Burkina Faso have highlighted how uncertainty and lack of sound strategic planning may lead to further chaos.³ But they underestimate the existence of a political culture of easily reaching consensus, mobilisation, and common action in Burkina Faso. They also pay insufficient attention to local social dynamics and the current global geopolitical context which offers a fertile ground for the experimentation of an unconventional political project. This analysis problematises the simplistic over-attributions of the

2. Only a handful of civil society organisations maintained that the military should hand power over to a civilian leader right after the coup d'état. Centre Pour la Gouvernance Democratique (CGD), a Ouagadougou based think tank recommended a civilian transitional President with the coup leaders still working alongside.

3. ADF, Magazine. "Burkina Faso Inches Closer to Wagner Mercenaries." Africa Defense Forum, January 31, 2023. <https://adf-magazine.com/2023/01/burkina-faso-inches-closer-to-wagner-mercenaries/>.



current dynamics to foreign actors which delegitimise local agency. It seeks to deliver a critical analysis for understanding the pathway the country is embracing. It calls on think tanks, regional organisations, and development partners to renew their engagement in Burkina Faso to help envision democracy in a post-jihadist, post-military reality.


A BREAK WITH FRENCH HEGEMONY

Nowhere else is the diplomatic turn of the Traoré regime as clear as in its shifting relationship with France. In just a few months as head of the state, the new administration has requested a change of France's ambassador, suspended the broadcasting of French radio RFI, and requested the withdrawal of France's military based in the country. At its independence in 1960, despite having a very modest army, the new government rejected France's offer to maintain a military presence. In 1961, when the leaders of the *Conseil de l'Entente* comprising Upper Volta (Burkina Faso), Côte-d'Ivoire, Dahomey (Benin), and Niger sought to sign an accord of cooperation with France, President Maurice Yameogo of Upper Volta took a different position from his colleagues and rejected French military on the ground.⁴

The first government of Upper Volta agreed to sign "Military Technical Assistance Cooperation" with France in April 1961. Per the terms of this agreement, France committed to sending military personnel to Upper Volta's army for organizing, training, and instruction purposes. It also committed to supporting Upper Volta's army with the acquisition of military equipment. The contract further stipulates that, "The Republic of Upper Volta, to ensure the standardization of armaments, must give preference to the French Republic for the maintenance and renewal of the materials and equipment of its armed forces."⁵ This agreement was in place till 1 March 2023 when the Burkinabe transitional government officially requested its termination.

4. Decraene, Philippe. "M. Yameogo Souhaite Ajourner La Signature Des Accords De Défense Entre La France Et La Haute-Volta." *Le Monde.fr*. Le Monde, April 20, 1961. https://www.lemonde.fr/archives/article/1961/04/21/m-yameogo-souhaite-ajourner-la-signature-des-accords-de-defense-entre-la-france-et-la-haute-volta_2269220_1819218.html.

5. https://www.senat.fr/leg/1960-1961/i1960_1961_0224.pdf



On the other hand, despite the unsteady statehood that has characterised the history of Burkina Faso and notwithstanding the fact that Blaise Compaoré in office for 27 years was a close French ally, the country maintained its tradition of not allowing the creation of a foreign military base until 2015. But following the 2014 uprising, a deal was negotiated with the transitional government led by Michel Kafando for a base to be established in Ouagadougou. It was subsequently revised in December 2018 under the tenure of President Roch Marc Christian Kaboré. This revision according to President Macron sought “to improve the legal framework for cooperation between our forces in full respect of each other’s sovereignty.”⁶ However, experts questioned the validity of this agreement pointing out that as per the Burkinabe constitution, parliament must be consulted before the signing of military agreements and that this had not been the case.⁷

The Ouagadougou base is home to *Opération Sabre*, which was created in 2009 to respond to growing threats against France’s interest in the Sahel but which had struggled to find a stable base in Africa until the agreement was struck with the Burkinabe authorities. Its 400-soldier commando unit aims to reinforce other French missions in the Sahel and Ouagadougou served as a central strategic location for its deployment to missions in the Sahel broadly. It only intervened sporadically in Burkina Faso; notably during the double terrorist attack against the French Embassy and the headquarters of the Burkinabe army in 2018. Yet public opposition towards the creation of the French military base in the country remained high although it was not until November 2021 that the first major demonstration against French troops in Burkina Faso was recorded. As an *Operation Barkhane* convoy left Mali and was passing through Burkina Faso on the way to Niger, spontaneous mobilisations were noted in Bobo Dioulasso, Ouagadougou, and Kaya where locals refused to let the French military convoy enter their towns.

Alongside historical opposition to the French presence, heightened insecurity led to the emergence of a popular perception that *Opération Sabre* was not bringing any added value to the fight against the violent armed groups.⁸

6. Le_Figaro. “La France Et Le Burkina Faso Renforcent Leur Coopération Militaire.” LEFIGARO, December 17, 2018. <https://www.lefigaro.fr/flash-actu/2018/12/17/97001-20181217FILWWW00244-la-france-et-le-burkina-faso-renforcent-leur-cooperation-militaire.php>.

7. Key Informant Interview, Feb 6, 2023

8. Key Informant Interview, Feb 6, 2023



Social media conspiracies flourished alleging that the French were even supporting terrorists in the Sahel with weapons and intelligence.⁹ The narrative of French interference was further reinforced during the coup d'état in September 2022. The coup leaders alleged that France may be harbouring deposed Lieutenant Colonel Damiba at its military base and seeking to help him reconquer power. This helped reinforce local opinion against France's military presence in the country and following these events it became increasingly clear the new regime would not be willing to allow *Opération Sabre* to continue to be stationed in Burkina Faso.

After denouncing the military accord allowing Sabre to station in Burkina Faso in January 2023, Ouagadougou denounced the 1961 military cooperation with France on 1 March. This would mean the official end of all military cooperation between the two countries and French military personnel and advisors to the Burkinabe national army must leave. The withdrawal of *Opération Sabre* from Burkina Faso and the termination of the 1961 military relations between the two countries represent a threat to the interest of France as a former hegemon who perceives Burkina Faso as a geostrategic enclave.

FEAR FOR A RUSSIAN INFLUENCE

The growing tense diplomatic relations are increased by fears of growing Russian influence and, possibly, a Wagner deployment in Burkina Faso. A recent report by CTC Sentinel, a reputable US military academy thinktank, suggested Burkina Faso will “highly” likely hire mercenaries of the Wagner Group.¹⁰ In Burkina Faso, these reports are not only dismissed as laughable but also as an unsolicited interference in the country's sovereignty in choosing its partners. While Wagner is the object of criticism for its alleged human right violations in Mali and the Central African Republic, private military, and security operations, including European and American ones are also present on the continent

9. Faivre, Agnès. “Burkina : CE Que Dit Le Blocage Du Convoi Militaire Français à Kaya.” Le Point, November 23, 2021. https://www.lepoint.fr/afrique/burkina-ce-que-dit-le-blocage-du-convoi-militaire-francais-a-kaya-23-11-2021-2453271_3826.php.

10. Nsaibia, Heni, and Cleb Weiss. “Oil on the Jihadi Fire: The Repercussions of a Wagner Group Deployment to Burkina Faso.” Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, January 30, 2023. <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/oil-on-the-jihadi-fire-the-repercussions-of-a-wagner-group-deployment-to-burkina-faso/>.



without being subject to the same level of scrutiny.¹¹

Officials are talking about diversifying military partnerships, meaning reinforcing and expanding military cooperation with countries other than France. But considering the Burkinabe tradition of shunning the presence of foreign forces, Russian mercenaries are not likely to be accepted despite the presence of Russian flags being waved during public rallies in support of the military. Since 2018, the scale of the security crisis has led citizens to launch self-defence initiatives.¹² The current transitional government has privileged local forces by formalising the recruitment of volunteers to be trained and equipped.

Russia is keen to position itself strategically in West Africa and the visit of the Russian foreign minister, Sergueï Lavrov to Mali on 7 February, was a clear indicator of its growing importance. Lavrov stated that Russia seeks economic and military cooperation in combating terrorism not just in Mali but also in Niger, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, and countries of the Gulf of Guinea. Whilst the acceleration of the cooperation between Mali and Russia is facilitated by historical ties between the two countries. During the cold war for example, Mali sided with the Eastern bloc, whilst several cadres of the Malian administration were trained in Russia. Burkina Faso, on the other hand, has limited connections. Its caution in engaging with Russia stems from a concern that it could be a strongly unbalanced relationship, not that different from the one they have had with France since independence. It is precisely this type of interminable entrapment with the West that Burkinabe youth are denouncing and rejecting.

The fluid diplomacy over the regimentation of the old alliances is a response to an internal emerging socio-political dynamic than an external influence. The Burkinabe military leaders have opted to experiment with this new approach to governance that draws from emerging social dynamics. Fear for Russian influence in Burkina Faso

11. Cascais, Antonio, and Reliou Koubakin. "Mercenary Armies in Africa – DW – 04/15/2022." dw.com. Deutsche Welle, April 15, 2022. <https://www.dw.com/en/the-rise-of-mercenary-armies-in-africa/a-61485270>.

12. Abdoul Karim Saidou, "La participation citoyenne dans les politiques publiques de sécurité en Afrique : analyse comparative des exemples du Burkina Faso et du Niger", International Development Policy | Revue internationale de politique de développement [Online], 11.1.2019



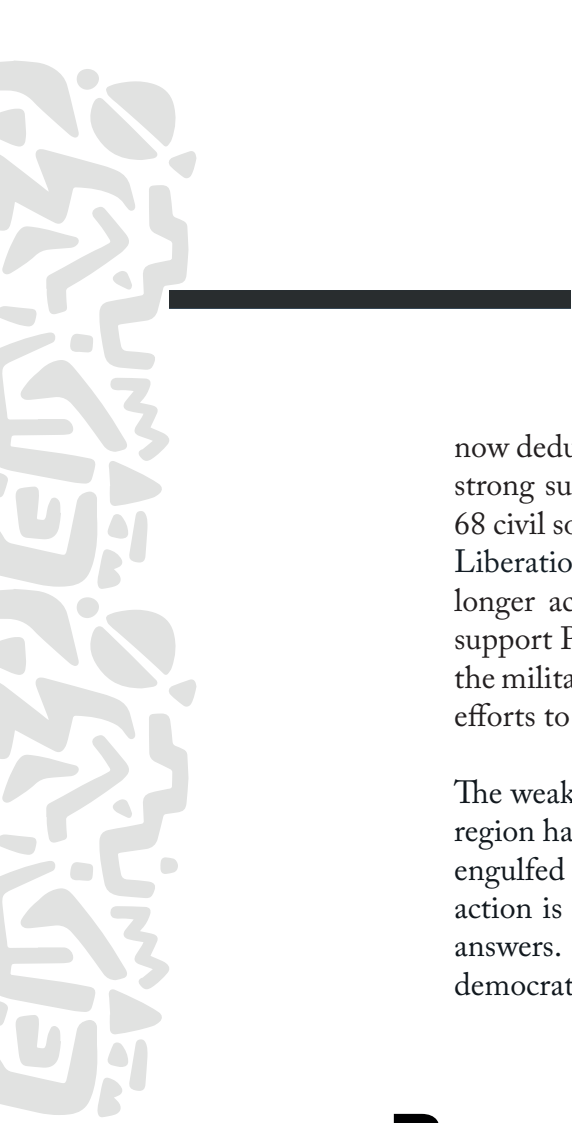
political turn completely misses the point on the political dynamic of the country on which the military emerged.

MILITARY CO-OPTS A NEW EMERGING SOCIAL DYNAMIC

The Burkinabe crisis is fundamentally the outgrowth of a domestic problem which found a contemporary channel, extremist violence, to manifest itself. The systematic inability of the state to manage its ethnic diversity especially pertaining to minority nomadic groups in the North has created deep frustrations which facilitated the emergence of extremism in that part of the country. Successive governments since 2014 have not been able to tackle the problem head on. There is a lack of understanding of the sociology of identity politics in the Burkinabe Sahel from a long durée perspective on how the crisis emerged, how it grew in capacity, and how it succeeded to connect with global terrorism networks to become capable of challenging state authority, any strategy at fighting it is futile.

The inability of the successive leaders to establish an efficient security dispositive has also contributed to the continued growth of violent extremist groups. For example, during the first two years of President Kaboré's tenure, the aggressors were perceived as being disgruntled members of the ousted regime of Blaise Compaoré. Likewise, official discourse which insinuates allegation that France is funding terrorism in Burkina Faso is a prevarication that further allowed leadership to avoid taking their responsibility. The Traore regime on the other hand has so far demarcated itself by seeking to build a responsible local response which acknowledges local responsibility in the degradation of the security situation.

One of the slogans that rallied the youth during the 2014 popular revolution was that "nothing will be like before". This outcry was couched in aspirations for profound democracy-enabled social change and a rejection of the monopoly of state power by a group of elites. In a way, there is a continuity of that 2014 youth mobilisation in what is



now deductively referred to as a manipulated “street”. The military regime has strong support from the youth. Under Damiba’s short tenure, a coalition of 68 civil society organisations called *Front de Libération Nationale* (or National Liberation Front) was born.¹³ Since the fall of Damiba, this coalition is no longer active on local media debate panels, but many more organisations support President Traoré and his government. Whilst civil society support of the military may appear paradoxical it is in fact a desperate effort to harmonise efforts to ensure much needed stability.

The weak, exploitative, unable to deliver models of liberal democracies in the region have disintegrated under the weight of the crisis that has progressively engulfed countries like Mali and Burkina Faso. In such a context, military action is touted as the solution to problems that require social and political answers. But how do you formulate such social and political answers democratically when the weak democracies have failed to do so?

BUILDING BACK DEMOCRACY

Burkina Faso is recomposing itself politically. The youth is highly involved in this process offering possibilities for a democratic rebound despite the democratic setbacks of 2022, which owe mostly to the failures of the elected regime to manage the devastating insecurity. Ousted President Kaboré was a product of the Burkinabe political elite class. He had been in administration for over three decades before becoming president. Although he broke away from President Compaoré’s Congress for Democracy and Progress (CDP) in 2011 to form his own party this was the result of internal party wrangling and not the consecration of democratic maturity. He had very little to offer once he ascended power.

To chart a path forward toward democracy that delivers security, justice, and

¹³ Traoré, Dramane. “Burkina Faso : Naissance D’un Nouveau Mouvement pro-Militaires Au Pouvoir.” <https://www.aa.com>. Accessed Feb 6, 2023. <https://www.aa.com.tr/fr/afrique/burkina-faso-naissance-d-un-nouveau-mouvement-pro-militaires-au-pouvoir/2664238>.



socio-economic development, civil society groups remain an important asset, including those that support the military. In fact, civil society is safeguarding the emergence of new democratic institutions and offering an opportunity to military actors to act in the interests of democracy. This is not always well captured in analyses of recent political developments which overlooks a prevailing political culture of reaching consensus on common action before mobilisation takes place. This dynamic which first took shape in the last years of the Compaoré regime, manifested clearly in 2014 when general popular mobilisation stopped changes to the constitution. The terrorist crisis which emerged around the same time has distracted this relentless dynamic, but it can still be summoned to address the current crisis. When Captain Traore launched a call for the recruitment of 50,000 volunteers to join the Volunteers for the National Defence (*Volontaires pour la Défense de la Patrie* or VDP), 90,000 people responded. Those selected are now being trained and equipped with weapons to defend their communities.

Many of the socio-political events of the last decade – the removal of a regime in power for 27 years in a popular revolt, the prevention of a coup d'état in 2015, two presidential elections and the trial of former president Blaise Compaoré and many other dignitaries suspected of involvement in the 1987 killing of Thomas Sankara - have helped institutionalise participative democracy which consecutive coups d'états cannot easily undo or derail even if there is popular support for the current military regime.

The 2022 coup d'états in Burkina Faso tap into notions of sovereignty restoration and decolonisation they are primarily supported because of frustrations with local realities. What is deeply desired by the youth movements that come out to demonstrate is the rejection of a local political hegemony that enables corruption and poor governance. In that sense what is popularly misconstrued as “anti-French sentiment” is not any different from a rejection of local manifestations of global capitalism. For many decades, France-Africa relations seem to reinforce and benefit local elites. The next generation of Burkinabe appear not to want the tutelage of France anymore and are willing to assert that openly.



REGIONAL RESPONSE

Burkina Faso is landlocked and shares borders with five countries including Côte d'Ivoire, Mali, Niger, Benin, Togo, and Ghana. In view of this geostrategic position of the country, it remains a central piece in the stability of West Africa. A change in the strategy for the fight against terrorism in Burkina Faso has implications for the entire neighbourhood. Growing friendly relation between Burkina Faso and Mali have raised concerns that they will join Mali, which has already withdrawn from the G5.¹⁴

Burkina Faso's geographical position at the crossroads of West Africa made it a geostrategic target for global violent extremist movements. The Islamic State in the Sahel and JNIM; its direct competitor, understand that Burkina Faso is the last bulwark between them and coastal West Africa which seems to be their ultimate target. This, in part, explains the upsurge of the attacks by both jihadist groups in Burkina Faso. Iyad Ag Ghaly the leader of JNIM has recently promoted Jaffar Dicko, the junior brother of Malam Dicko to the rank of Emir of JNIM in Burkina Faso. This suggests a strategic reorganisation of the militant extremist group in the country. A more concerted regional response to the terrorist threat is essential not just for Burkina Faso and Mali, but for the security of the whole West African region.

It is urgent for neighbouring countries to build more trust with Burkina Faso and to reinforce bilateral cooperation in ways that will prevent West Africa from becoming the battleground of a proxy war. Enhanced regional security, democracy and economic development requires ECOWAS engagement with all the countries, especially those undergoing difficult political transitions. Lifting the ECOWAS suspension in exchange for an agreed path to dialogue could be a starting point. On 9 February, the foreign ministers of Guinea and Mali joined their Burkinabe colleagues in Ouagadougou to make a joint statement calling for their reinstatement into the regional bloc, and the African Union. If they are not these states, caught at the crossroads of the urgent need to preserve territorial integrity in the face of relentless terror and an emerging

14. During a February official visit to Mali, the Burkinabe Prime Minister Apollinaire Kyélem de Tambela suggested that the two countries may join forces to create a federation. <https://www.africanews.com/2023/02/02/burkina-faso-mali-eye-federation-after-expelling-french-soldiers/>

global world order that disenfranchises self-affirmation outside the predefined confines of liberal democracy, may drift away from regional organisations to seek new possibilities. Although unlikely, during his 31 January 2023 visit to Mali, Burkina Faso's Prime Minister Apollinaire Joachim Kyélem de Tambèla hinted that his government could even explore the option of a federation between the two states.

The military transitional government have reset relations in Burkina Faso. Their goal to bring back security in the country is underway and they have mostly garnished support from civil society across the country. The challenge now is double: bringing back security and building back democracy. None of these twin endeavours can be met without the other. It is therefore crucial for regional cooperation to not be limited to military intervention projects such as the still-born Accra Initiative. Even though enhancing a regional military interoperability is necessary the point is that militarisation alone has proven inefficient¹⁵ in the anti-jihadist fight. Actors must draw from past militarised experiences to include socio-economic development projects in future initiatives. Regional disengagement with Burkina Faso risks stifling political deliberation and contributing to a tightening of the civic space as the country looks inward for a dynamic to propel itself out of the current quagmire.

15 The American post 9/11 all-encompassing Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership, which supported African member countries including Algeria, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Chad, Libya, Mali, Mauritania, Morocco, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, and Tunisia has not prevented the Sahel from becoming the epicentre of global jihad.

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