



CDD

Research report



TURBULENT REGION:

AN ANALYSIS OF TRENDS AND ACTORS OF
CONFLICT IN WEST AFRICA, OCTOBER
2022 – MARCH 2023

Nichole Grossman and Dengiyefa Angalapu

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ABOUT CDD

The Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD) was established in the United Kingdom in 1997 as an independent, not-for-profit, research training, advocacy and capacity building organisation. The purpose was to mobilise global opinion and resources for democratic development and provide an independent space to reflect critically on the challenges posed to the democratisation and development processes in West Africa.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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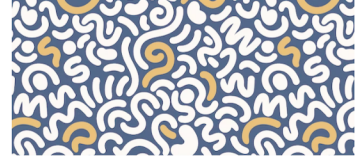
Nichole Grossman is a visiting scholar at the Centre for Democracy and Development. She is a Ph.D. Candidate in International Relations from American University in Washington, DC. During her time in Nigeria, Nichole is conducting field research for her dissertation titled “Seeking Chronic Healthcare in Forced Migration Camp Settings: The Case of Nigeria’s Internally Displaced Persons.”

Nichole's research focuses on the intersection between forced migration and health. Centered around the reality of limited access to healthcare within conflict zones and displacement camps, her research examines how communities navigate available services, how these communities cope when needed services are limited or non-existent, and the informal institutions that are created in the absence of formal healthcare. Her research uses a mixed-methods approach. Prior to arriving in Nigeria, Nichole has lived and traveled across many countries and has conducted additional fieldwork in Ethiopia.

Dengiyefa Angalapu

Dengiyefa Angalapu is a Research Analyst with the Centre for Democracy and Development. He is a Political Scientist interested in research and teaching on development challenges in the global south, specifically focusing on issues around climate change and conflict, policing, crude oil-related violence, maritime security, terrorism, environmental politics and sustainability.

He is also interested in issues of democracy and human rights. Dengiyefa Angalapu has vast experience working as a researcher on violence in Nigeria’s oil-rich Niger Delta, northcentral, northwest and northeast regions.



INTRODUCTION:

West Africa experiences a significant number of incidences of political violence each month. These incidences are tracked through media reports and logged within the ACLED database.[1] To keep track of the acts of insurgency as they relate to ECOWAS countries, the Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD) created the ECOWAS Counter-Terrorism Strategy Tracker (ECTS-Tracker). The tracker is an open data platform that provides a practical analysis of the operational policy framework for ECOWAS counter-terrorism actions and serves as a knowledge base to promote a common regional approach for counterterrorism by both state and non-state actors. The ECTS-tracker also serves as a tool for monitoring the efforts of States in implementing the ECOWAS Counter-Terrorism Strategy (CTS).

Each country across the region has their own distinct challenges which are reflected in the trends of incidences and fatalities. As a region, it is important to monitor these events to better understand these occurrences, their causes, the effects they have on their communities, countries, and regions, and to create predictions regarding possible future developments. The following report analyzes six months of the ACLED data and provides an overview of regional trends supported by individual country analyses to provide context for the trends observed. While many of the incidences tracked in the database stem from political motivations, not all incidences analyzed in this report are strictly political. For example, banditry may be an economic decision instead of a political one. Nonetheless, incidences of banditry have a political effect on the community in which they occur. For the purposes of remaining consistent with the ACLED database, this report refers to all incidences captured within the database and used for this report as being political in nature.

REGIONAL TRENDS:

Using data from October 1, 2022, through March 31, 2023, several trends of violence and resulting fatalities emerge across West Africa. Most notably, the highest number of fatalities come from countries experiencing high levels of terrorism: Nigeria, Mali and Burkina Faso. Over the past six months, these three countries are responsible for 92% of the fatalities due to political violence across West Africa. The other 14 countries comprise only 8% of these fatalities. Chart 1 below highlights this discrepancy over the six-month period. This is not particularly surprising. Mali and Burkina Faso have experienced military coups in response to the violent extremism in their respective countries and are no longer under democratic rule.

[1] "Data Export Tool - ACLED," accessed April 30, 2023, <https://acleddata.com/data-export-tool/>.

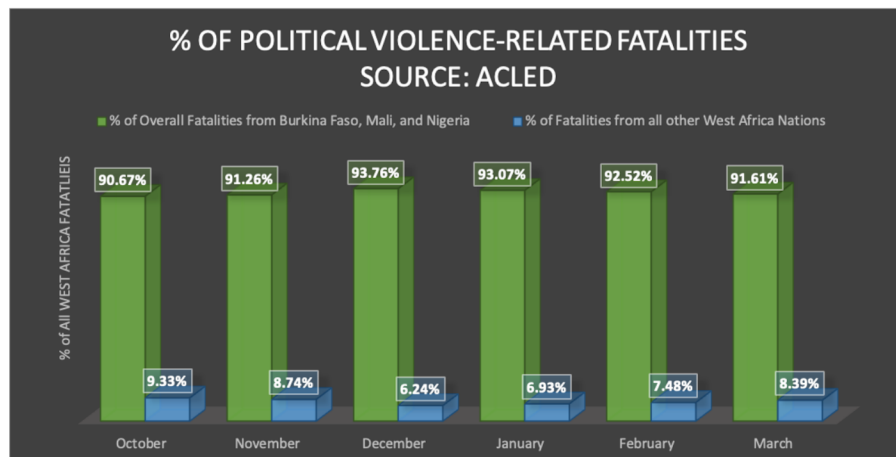


Despite continuing democratic rule, Nigeria has consistently had the highest fatality rate in West Africa. Navigating a myriad type of violence including banditry, terrorism, and herder/farmer clashes, Nigeria consistently outpaces its neighbors in this regard as pictured in Graph 1 below. The elections of January and March also had an impact on the level of violence in Nigeria and are reflected in the types of violence that resulted in fatalities during this period.

Despite these three countries representing the bulk of political violence during the past six months, additional regional trends are notable. Niger, Togo, Ghana, and Benin saw the next highest number of fatalities during this time. This can largely be attributed to spillover effects from the activities in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Nigeria. Almost all fatalities within these borders are attributed to armed clashes between the nation's military personnel and one of the terrorist organizations that have become commonplace within Nigeria, Mali, and Burkina Faso. Niger has been infiltrated by terrorist organizations from all its neighbors with Boko Haram crossing the border from Nigeria, the Islamic State crossing over from Nigeria, Mali, and Burkina Faso, Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) from Burkina Faso, and the Tuareg Ethnic Militia crossing over from Mali. Due to their location bordering all three of the deadliest nations, Niger has the next highest fatality rate in West Africa. The Togolese, Ghanaian, and Beninois militaries have engaged in armed clashes with JNIM members crossing over from Burkina Faso. It is imperative that the region work together to contain these various terrorist groups to minimize their spread into bordering nations.

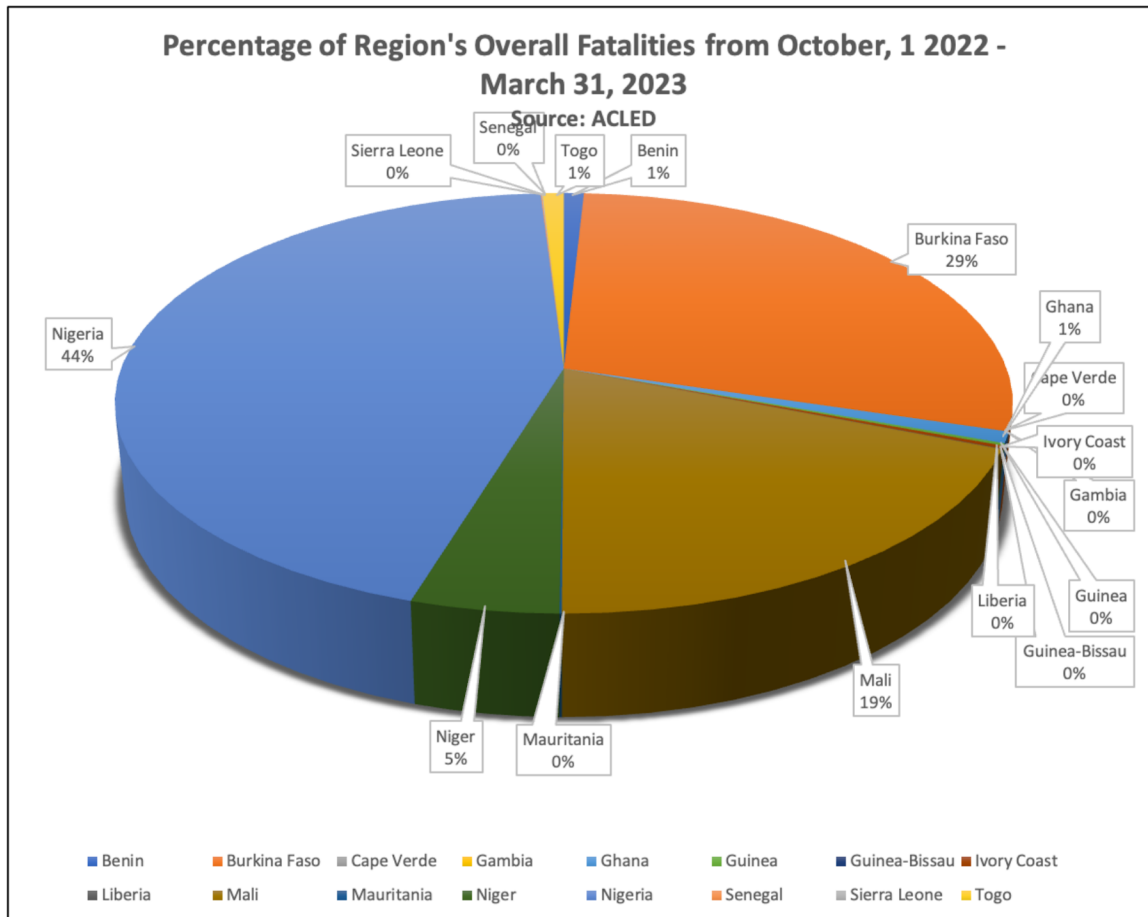
While much of the focus of political engagement in West Africa was on incidences of violence, a significant number of peaceful protests were recorded during this timeframe. (See Map 2). As with other types of incidences, Nigeria has the highest number overall. However, this is still only 16% of all total recorded incidences. In other countries, peaceful protests represented a large percentage of the recorded incidences during the period. The following countries all had a significant portion of the recorded incidences as peaceful protests without fatalities: Guinea (35%), Liberia (41%), Guinea Bissau (56%), Senegal (58%), Mauritania (93%), and Cape Verde (100%). This suggests that while a large portion of the region is making their political statements through violence, many are choosing to engage with the political process through peaceful means. As elections are around the corner for Sierra Leone, Mali, Liberia, Ivory Coast, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, and Togo it is important to watch these trends to see how the election process affects the methods of political engagement most often pursued throughout the region.

Chart 1:

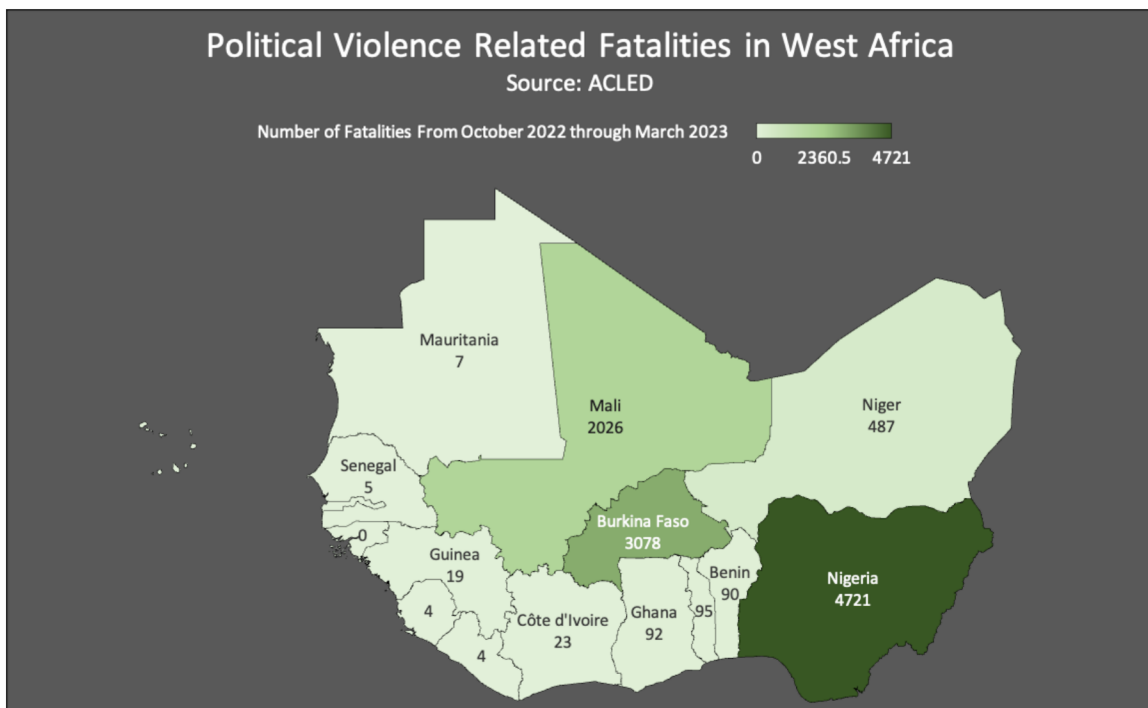




Graph 1:

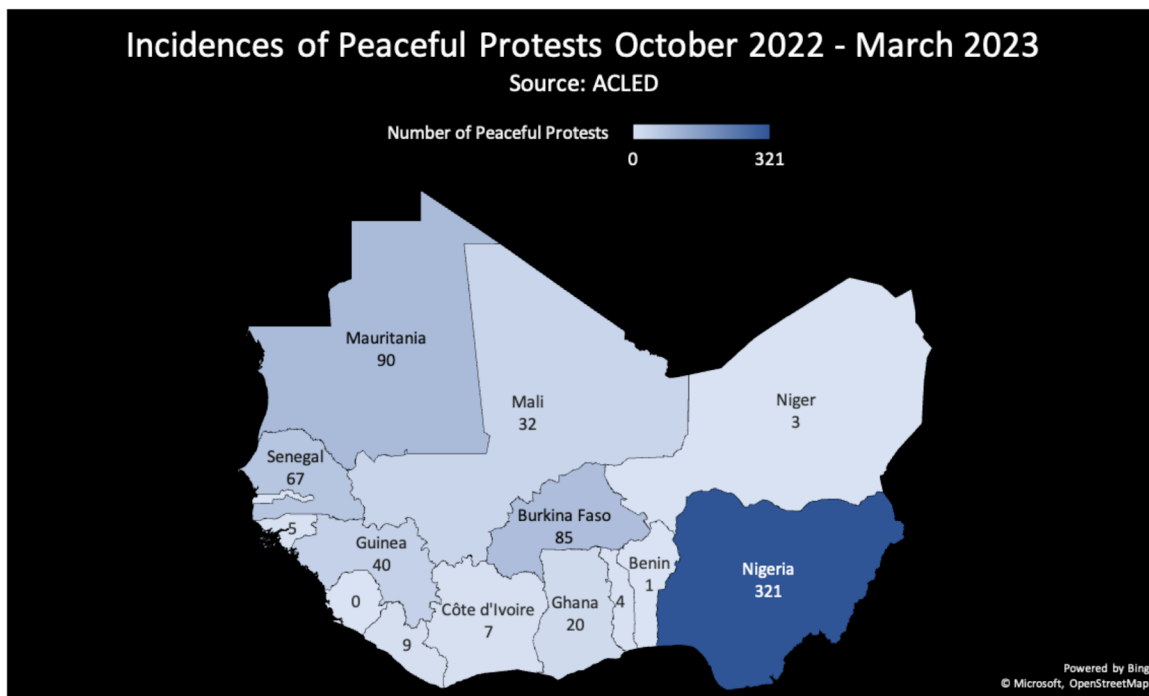


Map 1:





Map 2:



INDIVIDUAL COUNTRY DYNAMICS AND TRENDS

Countries in Conflict

Nigeria:

Nigeria is navigating violence in many forms across the bulk of the country. These trends are best examined by looking at the three deadliest types of incidents that are tracked by the ACLED data. These are air/drone strikes which most often refer to military attacks on terrorist or rebel groups, armed clashes which have two groups actively fighting each other with deadly weapons, and attacks which i.e., when one group attacks a sitting target that is not actively engaging in a counterattack. These data tell a story of Nigeria during this six-month period. (See Chart 2.) In all months, the fatalities outnumbered the incidences of fatal events. A comparably small number of incidences led to significant fatalities. In the last three months of 2022, the Nigerian military was engaging in numerous air or drone strikes targeting terrorist organisations, primarily in the bush across the northern regions of the country. These attacks hit their peak-level fatalities in December in the lead up to the presidential and national assembly elections in January. The spike in the death toll during this time can be attributed to a high number of deaths of insurgents.



The attacks were part of a governmental initiative to establish a sense of security for voters to safely engage in the democratic process.[2] Eight of the ten air/drone strikes that occurred in the month of January happened prior to the presidential election on January 18 as the goal was to create security for voters going to the polls in regions where terrorism is commonplace. As in the month of December, the majority of the deaths in January due to drone/air strikes were insurgents, not civilians. In addition to the high number of insurgent fatalities, many abductees were rescued. Once the elections were held, these types of attacks all but ceased. Armed clashes are the deadliest type of attacks across the entirety of the analysis period. It is notable that the incidences of armed clashes were fairly consistent throughout the timeframe. Despite this, the number of fatalities continued to increase throughout the last three months of 2022 and dropped considerably to their lowest point in January before almost doubling in February. This can also be explained by the election cycle. During the month of January, the Nigerian military was engaged in election-related security and were not engaged in active combat or attacks against terrorist groups. Instead, most of the armed clashes during his month were between terrorist groups and local or volunteer militias or police forces. Since the military was not often involved in these clashes, the fatality rates were lower than in the months leading up to the elections where the military was actively engaged in missions to diminish terrorist forces. This resulted in less insurgent deaths and more civilian deaths. After the presidential and national assembly elections in February, concerns about the election administration and results led to an increase in armed clashes and subsequently to the military reengaging in these types of violent incidences explaining the sharp increase of armed clashes from January to February.

The third type of political violence which yielded high fatality rates is ‘attacks.’ These are one-side attacks usually from terrorist organizations on civilian populations, although sometimes they choose to attack military or civil servant targets. The months of October and November were dominated by attacks by banditry groups/militia groups in the Northwestern region of the country and farmer/herder conflicts in the North Central region. In December the attacks continued in the Northwest and, in the leadup to the election, attacks from the separatist group—the Indigenous Peoples of Biafra (IPOB)—ramped up in the Southeast region. These attacks were particularly deadly. However, in January, the presidential elections had a dampening effect on the banditry and separatist organizations with no single attack resulting in double-digit fatalities.

However, in February, deadly attacks heightened with banditry groups which accounted for 78 of the attacks. In the same month, 20 of the incidents were attacks between farmers and herders resulting in 60 fatalities. While IPOB became quiet during this time, attacks

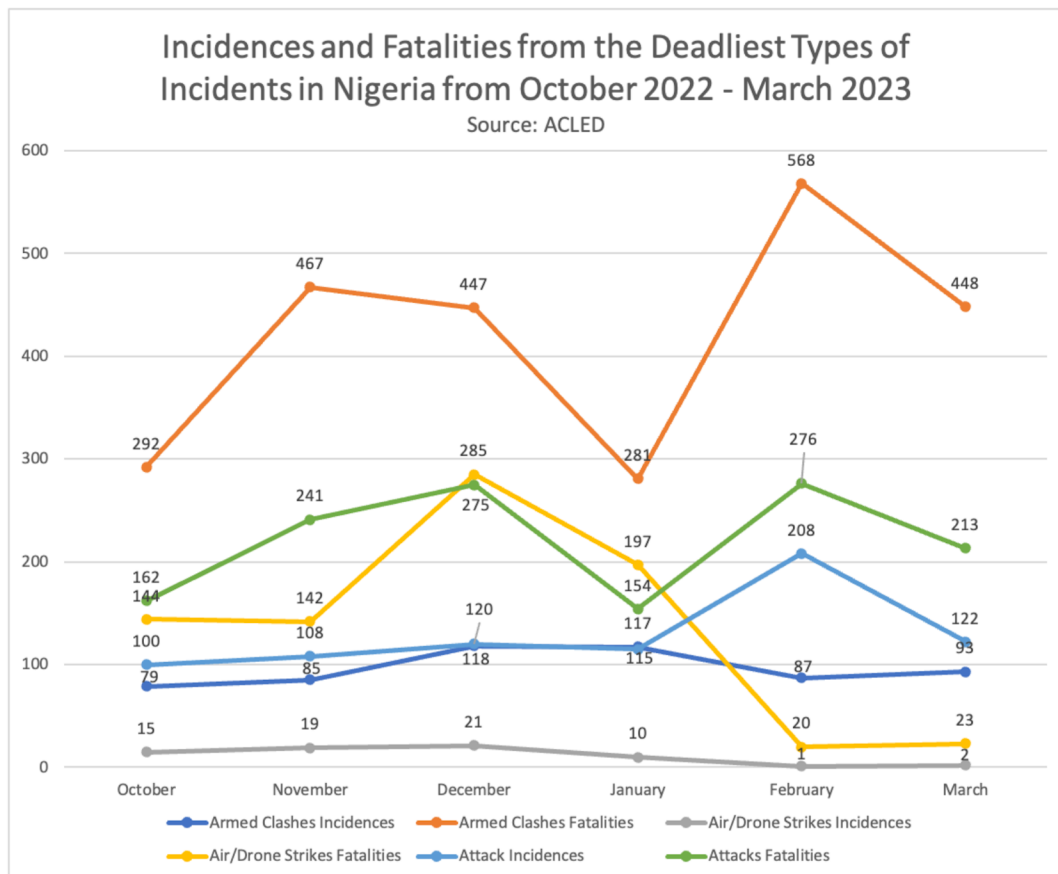
[2] Maina Maina, “Nigerian Airstrike Kill Scores of Boko Haram in Banki,” Daily Post Nigeria (blog), October 29, 2022, <https://dailypost.ng/2022/10/29/nigerian-airstrike-kill-scores-of-boko-haram-in-banki/>.



initiated by international terrorist organizations such as ISWAP and Boko Haram occurred again for the first time during the observed period, although with minimal fatalities. More interestingly, seven of the fatalities during the month were attributed to attacks perpetrated by political parties - a direct result of the tension that arose from the disputed election results. These trends from February continued through March with more than half of the attack-related fatalities in the month coming from farmer/herder conflicts and ISWAP. While the timeframe was dominated by bandit and militia attacks in the first three months, the months following the elections brought back extremely deadly attacks between farmers and herders and by international terrorist organizations. Militant deaths during the months of February and March were minimal in comparison to the months leading up to the presidential elections.

Given these trends, it is reasonable to suspect that April through June will level-off now that the elections have been completed with fatality levels closer to the levels observed in the month of March.

Chart 2





Burkina Faso:

Burkina Faso has shown interesting trends in both the number of fatalities and the types of incidences that have led to these fatalities over the analysed timeframe. While Nigeria's trends were best explained by the election cycle, the trends in Burkina Faso are best explained by the progression of the military's fight against violent extremism. The number of fatalities from the three deadliest types of incidents continued to increase across the observed timeframe. Overall, the number of incidents only rose slightly but the number of fatalities increased dramatically meaning that individual incidents were deadlier as time progressed. To understand why this is so, it is imperative to examine Burkina Faso's approach to partnering with international militaries in pursuit of defeating the various Islamic extremist groups that have infiltrated the nation.

As a former French colony, the French are often assumed to be the natural partner in situations such as these. They have engaged in military operations across their former colonies during times of internal turmoil. However, the Burkinabe government has severed military agreement between them and the French government. This culminated in a formal request by Burkina Faso for France to withdraw their troops from their territory which was completed and memorialised with a flag lowering ceremony on February 19, 2023.[3] At this time, Burkina Faso was provided with the full ability to defend themselves against the threats from the JNIM and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahel (IS Sahel), a salafi-jihadist militant group and affiliate of the transnational Islamic State (IS) organization. The severance of ties between the two nations also allowed for Burkina Faso to purchase arms from nations besides France without France's approval. Reports of the Burkinabe military strengthening its ties with foreign governments including those of Iran, Russia, and Venezuela have arisen noting talks of providing military weapons. This influx in weaponry, and the training of Burkinabe military and volunteer army explain the sharp increase in deaths from air/drone strikes witnessed between the months of February and March.

In preparation for the departure of the French military, the Burkinabe government increased their recruitment of volunteers to serve in the army for five years to curb terrorism. In February, 50,000 new volunteer soldiers were recruited.[4] This development aligns with the sharp increase of fatalities from armed clashes as many of these clashes were between volunteer military units and JNIM and why fatality rates were so high. In combination with the increase in armory, both offensive and defensive military attacks have become more deadly with one incident alone leaving 51 soldiers and 60 militants dead. With the speed and escalation of these attacks on both sides of the conflict, the number of wounded and dead are notoriously under-reported. The data in ACLED almost surely undercounts the fatality rates over February and March. We can expect to see a continued increase in incidences and fatalities across the nation as the military training of volunteer forces is completed and more weapons are imported into the country. The reported number of militant deaths are expected to increase as the military finalizes their trainings and embraces their increased arsenal including drones for airstrikes.

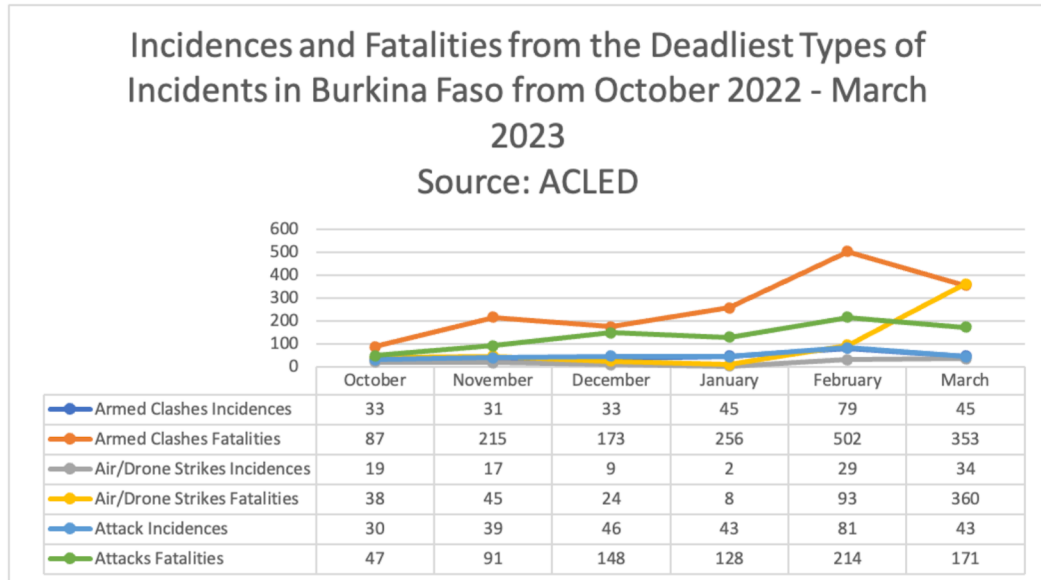
[3] "Burkina Faso Recruits 5,000 Soldiers to Fight Jihadists," accessed April 30, 2023, <https://punchng.com/burkina-faso-recruits-5000-soldiers-to-fight-jihadists/>.

[4] "Burkina Faso Marks Official End of French Military Operations on Its Soil | Reuters," accessed April 30, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/burkina-faso-marks-official-end-french-military-operations-its-soil-2023-02-19/>.



Additionally, Burkina Faso has begun to work in collaboration with Mali to fight the militant groups along their shared borders. These initiatives began in January but escalated during the months of March and April.[5] Along the 1300 km shared border, the two armies carried out joint combats against the terrorists. These coordinated attacks are proving to greatly increase the death toll in these regions and will be evident in the data provided in April.

Chart 3



Mali:

Like Burkina Faso, Mali is fighting an insurgency between the Malian Military government and JNIM and the Islamic State. Most notably in the data for this timeframe is the spike in the number of attacks and armed clashes during the month of February followed by an increase in air/drone strikes in March. All of the attacks noted in the data (see Chart 4) were against civilian targets. The ACLED data notes that almost as many attacks being perpetrated by the Malian military (31) as by the Islamic State and JNIM combined (36). Most notably, the attacks by the Malian military were deadlier than those by the mentioned terror organizations with 89 deaths being attributed to the military in collaboration with the Wagner mercenary group from Russia and only 62 deaths from attacks on civilians by terrorist groups. The number of civilian fatalities attributed to attacks by the military is concerning suggesting that targets are not being selected with enough care for the impact on civilians in the area. The Wagner Group entered Mali in January which accounts for the shift in strategy from the Malian government with a lull in January in preparation and planning for joint initiatives. [1] It is important to note that the ACLED data attributes these attacks to specific perpetrators based on relevant news reports, but the exact details are still highly debated by the Malian government and several international organizations.

[5] “Tracking the Arrival of Russia’s Wagner Group in Mali,” accessed April 30, 2023, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/tracking-arrival-russias-wagner-group-mali>.

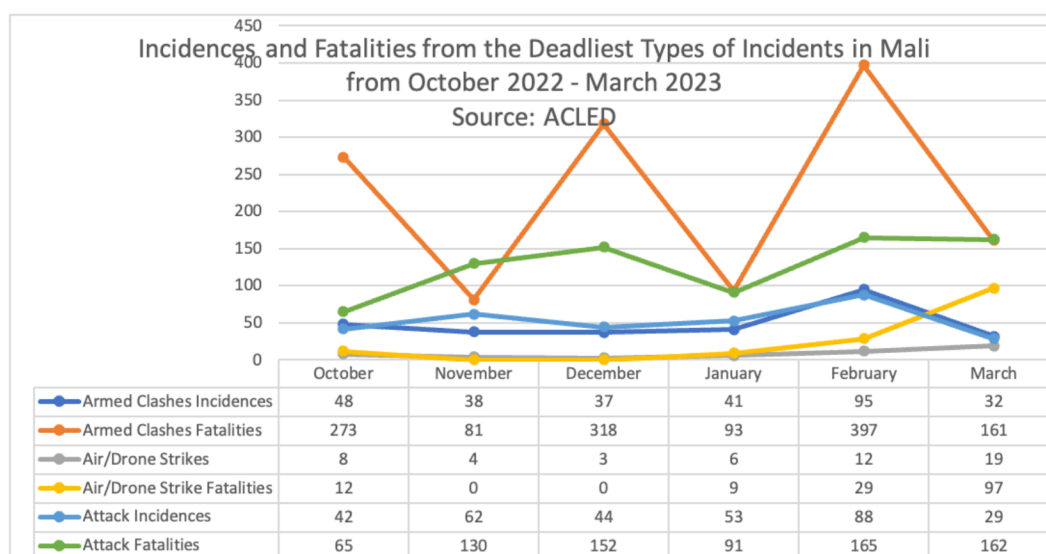
[6] “Burkina Faso and Mali to Coordinate Forces after Deadly Attacks | Reuters,” accessed April 30, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-burkina-attacks-mali-idUKKCN0UVOTI>.



Despite the number of armed clashes remaining rather steady from October through January, the number of fatalities varied wildly from month to month. The months with high fatality rates due to armed clashes were months when terrorist organizations were fighting each other. For example, in October there were 128 fatalities from armed clashes between two militant groups and only 41 fatalities from armed clashes between the Malian military and a militant organization. In December this rose to 281 deaths between militant groups with 81 deaths between military and militant groups. As the Malian government has gone on the offensive in recent months, militant groups have been forced to retreat leading to ‘down times’ when these groups are less active.[7]

Lastly, it is clear from the data that the Malian government is engaging in a traditional ground war against the militant groups. Air/drone strikes have remained a less utilized approach to the war. However, in March, these efforts were ramped up and proved to be deadlier than other types of military attacks. It is likely that the success of these air strikes will lead to a continuation in this tactic moving forward. In addition, the partnership with Burkina Faso to attack militants on their bordering regions will likely lead to an increase in fatalities in the coming months.

Chart 4



Countries Managing Spillover Terrorism

Niger:

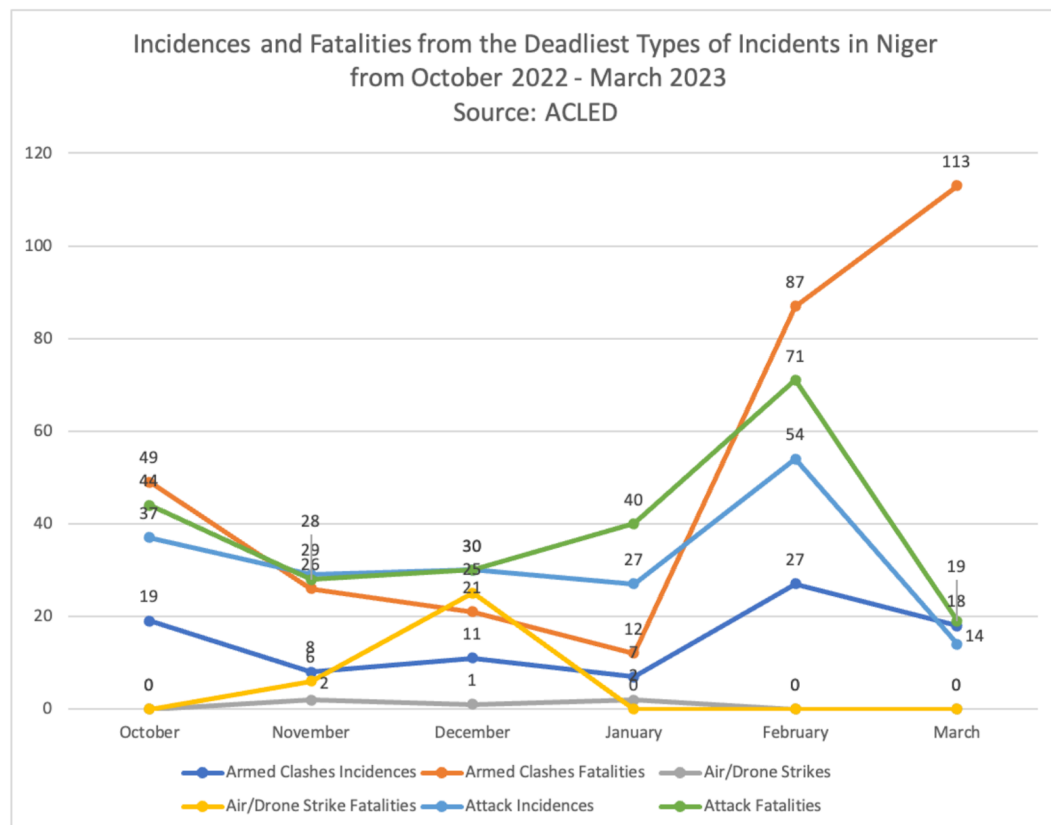
Compared to the three countries described above, Niger is not experiencing high levels of political violence. However, the political violence and associated fatalities can best be attributed to the events occurring in the nations which it borders. As the insecurity in Mali, Burkina Faso and Nigeria escalates, the likelihood of terrorist to retreat across the border into Niger increases. Niger rarely uses air/drone strikes against terrorist groups.

[7] Joe Penney, “With Russia at Its Side, Mali’s Military Government Marches Toward Renewing War in the North,” PassBlue, February 9, 2023, <https://www.passblue.com/2023/02/09/with-russia-at-its-side-malis-military-government-marches-toward-renewing-war-in-the-north/>.



However, armed clashes and attacks both tell a story in the data. In February, there was an increase in both types of incidences and the number of fatalities that coincided with them. In February, Niger experienced a significant increase in deadly attacks from terror groups, namely Boko Haram and the Islamic State which crossed the border from Nigeria as the latter's focus on elections limited their opportunities for attacks in Nigeria. Additionally, Mali's military offensives with Wagner group moved the Islamic State across the border into Niger as well. This led to these groups launching attacks on military bases and outposts in Niger with high rates of success as the Niger military was not prepared for this influx of militants. However, in March, the Niger military was more prepared for these attacks and went on the offensive leading to less clashes but higher fatality rates with an increase in militant deaths and a decrease in civilian and military deaths. In January, Niger and the EU launched a military partnership which was engaged in the rebuttal on terrorist organizations employed during March.[8] As the offensive attacks in Burkina Faso and Mali continue to drive these groups over the border into Niger, it is likely that the clashes between military and militant groups will continue to occur in the coming months.

Chart 5



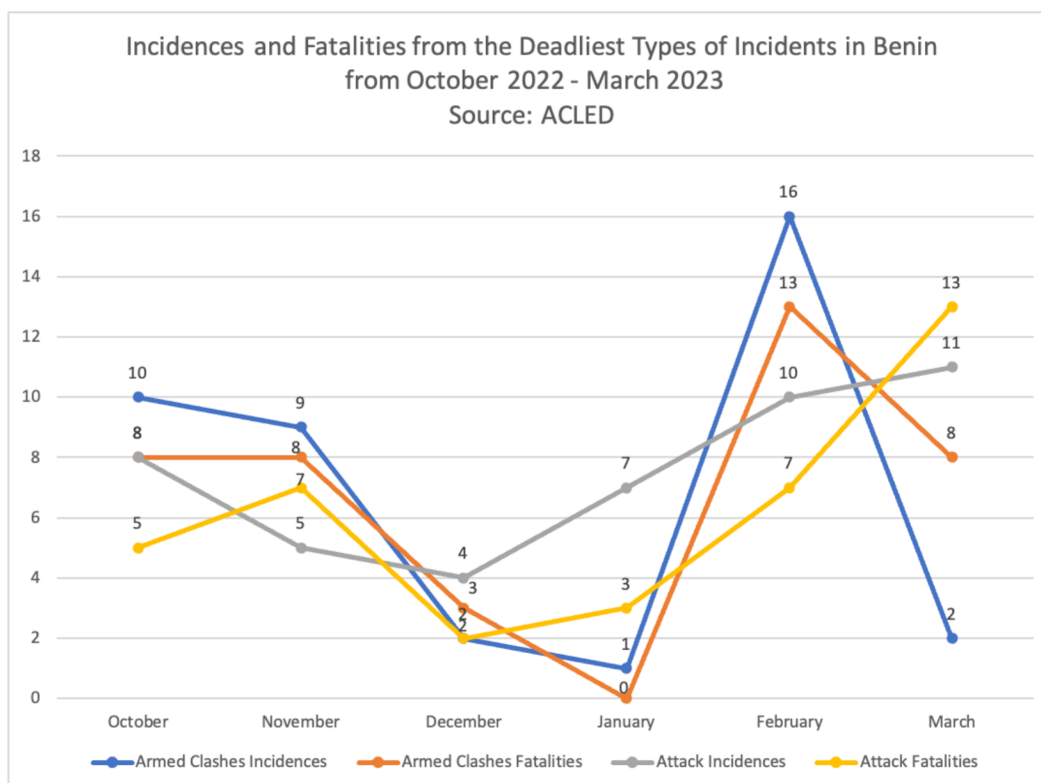
[8] "Niger: EU Launches Its Military Partnership Mission," accessed April 30, 2023, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2023/02/20/niger-eu-launches-its-military-partnership-mission/>.



Benin:

The number of incidences and fatalities in Benin are much lower than in the previously discussed countries. However, like Niger, the increase in both incidences and fatalities coincide with events in neighboring Burkina Faso and Nigeria. Notably, the number of incidences for attacks and armed clashes are higher than the number of fatalities for each type suggesting that Benin is not experiencing the same level and severity of attacks as Niger. In the month of February, the deadliest armed clash in February with 8 fatalities was the result of the Beninese army attempting to stop a militant group from crossing the border into their territory on the Burkina Faso border. In fact, all the armed clashes in February and March were along the Burkina Faso border. As Burkina Faso's collaboration with Wagner group intensified, more militants crossed over into Benin to regroup accounting for this increase in incidences of armed clashes. Attacks were more evenly distributed over the months of February and March with 5 attacks coming from militant groups on the Nigeria border, 11 attacks on the Burkinabe border, and 4 attacks between farmers and herders in the middle of the country or toward the Togo border. While a small portion of the attacks were related to internal strife, the bulk of these attacks resulted from militants crossing over the borders from Nigeria or Burkina Faso. Currently, most of the offensive attacks by the Burkinabe military are along the Malian border. However, as these attacks become more successful, it is likely that the range of the military's efforts will continue to push south pushing more militants over the border into Benin. Nigeria has experienced an uptick in attacks by militants in its northwestern region recently but not the corresponding military response that has pushed militants to flee. Unless this changes, militants crossing into Benin from Nigeria are likely to remain minimal.

Chart 6





Peaceful Political Engagement

Mauritania:

Mauritania was mostly peaceful during the timeframe analyzed. However, this does not mean they were not politically engaged. Each month, protests were organized in the nation, most often in the capital city of Nouakchott. These protests centered on the poor socio-economic conditions in the country and the lack of aid distribution to assist those impacted by floods. February was the height of these protests with labor unions across sectors organizing rallies and sit-ins to fight for better working conditions, trade agreements, and higher levels of engagement by the various government ministries. These protests supported teachers, educational opportunities, doctors and nurses, improved hospital conditions, fisherman, and dock workers to name a few. Mauritania is ranked #146 in the world in terms of purchasing power parity[10] but the percentage of people living at or below the poverty line was 31.8% as of 2019.[11] This is only a slight increase from the 20014 rate of 34.3%.[12] This slow improvement has led to significant dissatisfaction with the government. However, despite this, Mauritians have chosen to use non-violent methods to address their concerns with their government resulting in zero deaths during this timeframe from demonstrations.

Chart 7



[10] “Mauritania,” in The World Factbook (Central Intelligence Agency, April 26, 2023), <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/mauritania/#economy>.

[11] “World Development Indicators | DataBank,” accessed April 30, 2023, <https://databank.worldbank.org/reports.aspx?source=2&country=MRT>.

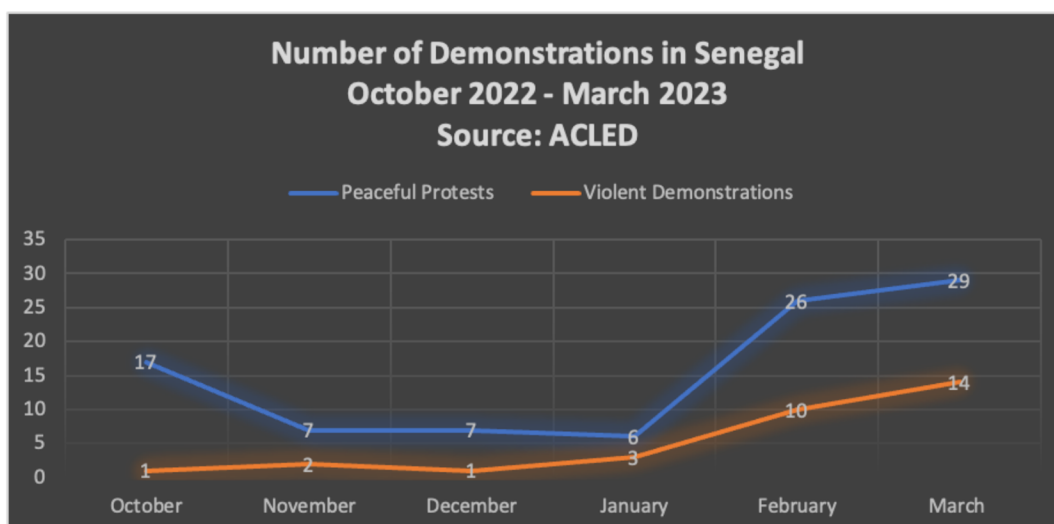
[12] “World Development Indicators | DataBank.”



Senegal:

Like Mauritania, the Senegalese have chosen to address their concerns with the government's performance through demonstrations. Unlike Mauritania, some of these demonstrations turned violent. However, while property damage was reported during these violent demonstrations, no deaths were reported. While most of the demonstrations occurred in the capital city of Dakar, many demonstrations transpired in cities across the country. These demonstrations addressed concerns about political prisoners, grievances about governmental projects such as market, stadium, and rail construction not meeting their scheduled timeline, and concerns about the state of the healthcare system. Poor working conditions were also a reason for protest in various economic sectors. General socio-economic factors were less a factor in the complaints as Senegal is economically prosperous compared to other sub-Saharan African countries with only 9.3% of the population at or under the poverty line as of 2019.[13] The increase in protests during February and March coincided with criminal charges for opposition party leader Ousmane Sonko, the head of the African Patriots of Senegal for Work, Ethics and Fraternity (PASTEF) party.[14] Mr. Sonko was convicted of two counts of youth corruption, although acquitted of rape, on 1 June, 2023, which has led to mass protests including several deaths. Given this development, it is likely that the summer months will result in increased tension and violence.[15]

Chart 8



[13] "World Development Indicators | DataBank."

[14] "Senegal: Increased Security Likely in Dakar Ahead of High-Profile Court Hearing Feb. 16," Senegal: Increased security likely in Dakar ahead of high-profile court hearing Feb. 16 | Crisis24, accessed April 30, 2023, <https://crisis24.garda.com/alerts/2023/02/senegal-increased-security-likely-in-dakar-ahead-of-high-profile-court-hearing-feb-16>; "Protests in Senegal Turn Violent as Opposition Leader Heads to Court," accessed April 30, 2023, <https://www.voanews.com/a/protests-in-senegal-turn-violent-as-opposition-leader-heads-to-court/7008513.html>.

[15] "Ousmane Sonko Sentenced: Why Are Tensions Flaring in Senegal? | Explainer News | Al Jazeera," accessed June 3, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/6/2/ousmane-sonko-sentenced-why-are-tensions-flaring-in-senegal>.



STRATEGIC DEVELOPMENTS

On October 24, 2022, the United States and United Kingdom announced the recall of embassy officials from Abuja, citing a heightened risk of a significant terrorist attack. This led to the closure of schools, some public offices and large malls. Beyond the preparation for election, it partly explains the drastic launch of various offensive attacks including air strikes by the military.

Motor bikes have continued to be the major means of transportation for terrorist groups in the region. However, beyond the banning and curfews to limit their operations, there has not been any known framework to track the importation and use of motor bikes. Within the last six months, the Benin government towed the approach of banning motor bikes – an approach Nigeria experimented in short terms without significant successes. On 10 March 2023, Benin republic government banned motorcycle traffic between 9 p.m. and 6 a.m. in Tanguieta, Atacora, Karimama, Alibori, Kerou, Atacora, Segbana, Banikoara and Coblé.

Another strategic development is the formal withdrawal of France forces from Burkina Faso and its new reliance on civilian volunteers – In February, the country recruited 50,000 new volunteer soldiers and handed them military type weapons. Whilst the country is convinced that this move will not pose future challenges for the country and the region, anecdotal evidence from the application of this approach in Liberia and Sierra Leone shows it could be counterproductive. In future, this would raise issues of not just effective deradicalization but challenges of weapon mopping in a country that still struggles to apply digital and innovative ways of weapon marking.

In January, Niger and the EU launched a military partnership under the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) to assist Niger in its battle against terrorist armed organizations. It would strengthen Niger's Armed Forces' capabilities to control the threat, defend the country's population, and maintain a safe and secure environment in accordance with human rights law and international humanitarian law. This is especially important to watch as violence in Niger continues to spike because of the spill over effects from its neighbours.



REGIONAL OUTLOOK

West Africa has seen numerous conflicts, ranging from internal insurgencies, communal violence, and state counterinsurgencies. Political instability, ethnic and religious tensions, economic grievances, and resource competition have all contributed to these conflicts. The report emphasized the interconnectedness of the region's conflicts. Many conflicts cross national boundaries, exacerbating tensions and generating complex regional dynamics. Cross-border movements of fighters, weapons, and illicit activities have contributed to conflict prolongation and intensification. Over the last six months, Nigeria, Mali, and Burkina Faso have been responsible for 92% of all political violence fatalities in West Africa. Only 8% of these fatalities occurred in the other 14 countries. This is not at all surprising. On the one hand, Nigeria is faced with intractable security challenges from banditry, terrorism, violent separatist agitations, sea piracy, farmer-herder clashes amongst others. On the other hand, Mali and Burkina Faso have both experienced military coups in response to violent extremism in their respective countries, and neither country is now governed democratically. What is perhaps more worrisome is the spread of violent extremism in West Africa to hitherto relatively peaceful countries. During this period of this Niger, Togo, Ghana, and Benin had high fatalities primarily due to spillover effects from activities in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Nigeria. Almost all fatalities within these borders are the result of armed clashes between the country's military and one of the terrorist organizations that have become common in Nigeria, Mali, and Burkina Faso.

As Mali and Burkina Faso continue to escalate their offensive attacks against militant groups, there is likely to be a continued high level of incidences and fatalities until the military can regain control. This will lead to more militants crossing the borders into other nations who will increase their awareness and response to their presence. This means that West Africa will most likely have higher overall levels of incidences and fatalities across more countries during the coming months. Nigeria's minimalist approach to the various forms of violence within its borders will lead to a continued high rate of incidences and fatalities across the nation. Perhaps the new president, sworn in on 29 May 2023, will reevaluate the military's approach to these security concerns.

Many nations in the region have relied on peaceful protests to pressure their governments into improving their societies. However, as more nations are set to go to the polls in 2023 and early 2024, it is possible that many of these protests could turn violent. The moves made by each individual country's government have a lasting impact across the region making it imperative that trends be evaluated at the regional level, not just the country level. Also, the region's deteriorating security situation necessitates more collaborative efforts between states in West Africa. There is a need for a common and holistic strategy towards terrorism in West Africa beginning from joint border patrols and information sharing.



RECOMMENDATIONS:

On the basis of the above findings, the study proposes a series of recommendations, which include:

Enhance counterterrorism efforts in Nigeria, Mali, and Burkina Faso: With these three countries accounting for a staggering 92% of political violence fatalities in West Africa, it is imperative to go beyond military action and focus on intense, comprehensive counterterrorism strategies specific to the needs of each country. This entails bolstering intelligence sharing, enhancing the capacity of security forces, and addressing the underlying drivers of extremism. Regional and international collaboration is crucial to effectively combat terrorism and prevent its spread to neighboring nations.

Forge stronger regional cooperation to curb terrorist groups: The spillover effects of violence from Mali, Burkina Faso, and Nigeria have impacted countries like Niger, Togo, Ghana, and Benin. To counter this threat, it is essential for these nations to collaborate closely, pooling resources and expertise. This includes joint military operations, intelligence coordination, and reinforced border security measures. ECOWAS and the African Union should play a pivotal role in facilitating and supporting these collective efforts to contain and eliminate terrorist organizations in the region.

Empower peaceful political engagement and uphold democratic processes: While violence remains a concern, the prevalence of peaceful protests across West Africa highlights the potential for non-violent political expression. Policymakers must prioritize the strengthening of democratic institutions, ensuring inclusivity in governance, and conducting transparent elections. Technical assistance, dialogue facilitation, and civic education should be provided to empower citizens and encourage their active participation in shaping the region's political landscape. By embracing peaceful means of political engagement, West Africa can build a more stable and prosperous future.

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