

# Coup–Terrorism Nexus: Security Implications of Political Instability in Francophone West Africa

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<b>Abstract</b>	<i>Journal of Policy and Development Studies (JPDS)</i>
<p><i>The wave of military coups in Francophone West Africa in recent years—most notably in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger—has coincided with a marked escalation of terrorist violence, intensifying the region’s already fragile security environment. Despite extensive literature on coups and terrorism individually, the complex interplay between them remains insufficiently examined. This study investigates the coup–terrorism nexus, examining how unconstitutional regime changes reshape security governance and influence patterns of extremist violence. Employing a qualitative comparative approach supported by event-based datasets from Armed Conflict Location &amp; Event Data (ACLED) and the Global Terrorism Database, the analysis identifies three critical pathways linking coups to rising insecurity: diminished state capacity, the breakdown of regional counter-terrorism cooperation, and geopolitical realignments away from traditional partners such as France. Findings revealed that post-coup transitions often produce security vacuums that militant groups exploit, undermining counterinsurgency operations and regional stability. These insights carry significant implications for ECOWAS policy frameworks, African Union security strategies, and the design of resilient governance structures in conflict-prone states.</i></p>	<p>Vol. 19 Issue 1 (2025) ISSN(p) 1597-9385 ISSN (e) 2814-1091 Home page: <a href="https://www.ajol.info/index.php/jpds">https://www.ajol.info/index.php/jpds</a></p> <p><b>ARTICLE INFO:</b> <b>Keywords:</b> <i>Military coups, terrorism, Francophone West Africa, state fragility, regional Security.</i></p> <p><b>Received:</b> 12<sup>th</sup> June 2025 <b>Revised:</b> 27<sup>th</sup> July 2025 <b>Accepted:</b> 2<sup>nd</sup> August 2025</p> <p>DOI <a href="https://dx.doi.org/10.4314/jpds.v19i1.2">https://dx.doi.org/10.4314/jpds.v19i1.2</a></p>

## 1. Introduction

Since 2020, Francophone West Africa has witnessed an alarming resurgence of military coups, reversing decades of incremental democratic consolidation. Mali experienced two successive coups in August 2020 and May 2021; Guinea's civilian government was toppled in September 2021; Burkina Faso endured two military seizures of power in January and September 2022; and Niger's elected leadership was overthrown in July 2023. These unconstitutional changes in government have unfolded against a backdrop of escalating jihadist violence across the Sahel, perpetrated by groups such as the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM), and affiliates of Boko Haram (ACLEDE, 2024; GTD, 2023). The temporal overlap between renewed political instability and intensifying militant activity raises critical questions about the relationship between coups and terrorism in the region.

The post-Cold War era initially heralded optimism for political liberalization in West Africa. The 1990s brought multiparty elections, constitutional reforms, and strengthened civil society, supported by both domestic demands for accountability and international frameworks promoting governance reforms (Clark, 1997; Bratton, 1997). Yet, the democratic gains of the period have proven fragile. From the early 2000s onwards, persistent governance deficits, corruption, and uneven socio-economic development have undermined state legitimacy. In the Sahel, these weaknesses intersected with security crises—most notably the spillover of Libya's 2011 collapse, the 2012 Tuareg rebellion in Mali, and the rise of transnational jihadist networks—producing one of the world's most volatile security complexes (Lacher, 2020; Thurston, 2020). By the late 2010s, jihadist insurgencies had entrenched themselves in vast rural areas, exploiting governance vacuums and cross-border mobility. Mali's central and northern regions, Burkina Faso's Sahel and Est provinces, and western Niger became epicenters of violence, with thousands killed annually and millions displaced (UNHCR, 2023). Against this backdrop, militaries in several Francophone West African states justified coups as necessary interventions to restore security. However, rather than reversing instability, evidence suggests that post-coup transitions often disrupt command structures, weaken counterterrorism coordination, and embolden militant groups (ICG, 2022; ISS, 2023).

Despite the apparent simultaneity of military takeovers and surging terrorist violence, the causal relationship between the two phenomena remains under-theorized. Existing literature tends to treat coups and terrorism as parallel challenges rather than interconnected dynamics. This analytical gap is significant, as understanding whether and how coups exacerbate insecurity could inform both domestic security reforms and regional policy frameworks. This study addresses two interrelated questions:

1. Does the occurrence of a military coup in Francophone West Africa correlate with an increase in terrorist activity?
2. Through what mechanisms do coups influence the security landscape in affected states?

Existing studies suggest that military coups in Francophone West Africa can create enabling environments for terrorist expansion through three principal pathways:

1. Diminished state capacity – abrupt leadership changes fracture political authority and disrupt military chains of command.
2. Breakdown of regional counter-terrorism cooperation – particularly within ECOWAS and the G5 Sahel, as post-coup governments face sanctions, diplomatic isolation, and suspended joint operations.
3. Geopolitical realignment – where juntas distance themselves from traditional security partners, notably France, in favor of alternative alliances with actors such as Russia, altering operational strategies and external support dynamics

These dynamics are mutually reinforcing, accelerating the erosion of already fragile governance structures and undermining long-term stabilization efforts. By integrating political science and security studies perspectives, this research situates the coup–terrorism nexus within the broader discourse on state fragility and regional security governance. While the literature on coups in Africa is extensive (Powell & Thyne, 2011; Coulibaly, 2022) and scholarship on jihadist violence in the Sahel is growing (Thurston, 2020; Cold-Ravnkilde & Albrecht, 2021), few studies systematically examine their inter-linkages in Francophone West Africa. This study fills that gap through a qualitative comparative analysis of recent coups and terrorism trends, drawing on event-based data to trace patterns and mechanisms of interaction.

The paper begins by reviewing the historical and political context linking coups and terrorism in Francophone West Africa, before outlining the methodological approach and comparative case studies of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. It then examines the implications for regional security governance—particularly for ECOWAS, the African Union, and external actors—and concludes with policy recommendations to strengthen resilience against both unconstitutional regime changes and extremist violence.

## **2. Conceptual and Theoretical Framework**

### *Coup–Terrorism Nexus*

For the purpose of this study, the coup–terrorism nexus refers to the mutually reinforcing relationship between unconstitutional changes of government—here defined as military seizures of political power that suspend or bypass constitutional processes—and the proliferation of organized political violence, particularly terrorism. In this context, terrorism is understood as the deliberate use or threat of violence by non-state armed groups against civilian targets, intended to achieve political, ideological, or religious objectives (Hoffman, 2017). While coups and terrorism are often treated as distinct security challenges, the temporal and spatial convergence of these phenomena in Francophone West Africa suggests a deeper structural interconnection. This nexus becomes particularly salient when post-coup environments generate security vacuums, institutional disarray, and shifts in alliance structures—conditions that militant actors can exploit to expand operational capacity and territorial reach.

### *Conceptual Boundaries and Relevance to Francophone West Africa*

The conceptual lens of this paper is shaped by the unique political history of Francophone West Africa, where the legacy of colonial administrative systems, post-independence elite politics, and enduring security dependencies on France have intersected with structural fragility. Coups in countries such as Mali (2020, 2021), Burkina Faso (2022), and Niger (2023) have occurred within complex conflict ecosystems characterized by porous borders, the proliferation of small arms, and active jihadist insurgencies. In these settings, military takeovers not only disrupt constitutional governance but also reorient the strategic priorities of armed forces from counterinsurgency to regime consolidation, weakening the state’s capacity to combat extremist threats (Powell & Thyne, 2011). The result is a compounded security crisis wherein terrorist actors leverage political instability to entrench their influence.

The study positions the coup–terrorism nexus within broader debates on state fragility and security governance, drawing attention to the manner in which coups undermine the legitimacy, coherence, and operational effectiveness of national security institutions. Existing research acknowledges the destabilizing potential of coups (Belkin & Schofer, 2003) and the tendency for terrorism to flourish in fragile or conflict-affected states (Piazza, 2008; Newman, 2007). However, scholarship rarely examines these dynamics in tandem, particularly in the Francophone West African sub-region. This research therefore addresses a critical gap by integrating the two phenomena into a single explanatory framework.

## ***Theoretical Lenses***

This study draws on three interrelated theoretical perspectives to interrogate the coup–terrorism nexus:

### ***State Capacity Theory***

State capacity theory posits that the ability of a state to maintain internal order, provide public goods, and enforce the rule of law is contingent upon the strength and stability of its political institutions (Fukuyama, 2004). Post-coup transitions typically weaken institutional capacity through purges of experienced security personnel, budgetary disruptions, and the erosion of civilian oversight mechanisms. In fragile contexts such as Mali and Burkina Faso, these institutional fractures diminish the state’s capacity to execute sustained counter-terrorism operations, thereby enabling militant expansion.

### ***Security Vacuum Hypothesis***

The security vacuum hypothesis suggests that periods of political instability create operational opportunities for armed non-state actors, as state security forces become preoccupied with consolidating regime control rather than addressing insurgent threats (Staniland, 2014). This diversion of resources and strategic attention has been evident in Mali following the August 2020 coup, where jihadist groups increased their attacks amid the transitional government’s focus on internal political restructuring.

### ***Alliance Realignment Theory***

Alliance realignment theory emphasizes how shifts in external security partnerships influence domestic counter-terrorism effectiveness (Walt, 1987). In Francophone West Africa, recent coups have precipitated geopolitical realignments away from France—a traditional security guarantor—towards alternative partners such as Russia. While such shifts may offer short-term regime protection, they can disrupt established intelligence-sharing frameworks, operational coordination, and logistical support, thereby reducing the overall effectiveness of counter-terrorism campaigns.

The relationship between coups and terrorism remains under-theorized in the African security literature. Studies by Belkin and Schofer (2003) and Powell and Thyne (2011) highlight the correlation between coups and political instability but do not sufficiently interrogate the downstream security effects on terrorist activity. Similarly, research by Newman (2007) and Piazza (2008) links terrorism to state weakness and political exclusion but stops short of exploring the catalytic role of military takeovers in accelerating insurgent momentum. By synthesizing these strands of scholarship, this study conceptualizes the coup–terrorism nexus as a distinct analytical construct, offering a more integrated account of how unconstitutional regime changes exacerbate terrorism risks.

Moreover, the literature on Francophone West Africa often frames security crises within the legacies of colonialism and post-colonial dependency (Chafer, 2002; Boone, 2003) but lacks empirical integration of how these structural factors interact with the immediate political consequences of coups. This study addresses that gap by situating the nexus within both historical patterns of security dependence and contemporary geopolitical shifts.

Understanding the coup–terrorism nexus has both scholarly and policy relevance. Conceptually, it advances the field by bridging two parallel strands of conflict research—military interventions in politics and non-state armed violence—into a unified framework that is contextually grounded in Francophone West Africa. Practically, it offers actionable insights for ECOWAS, the African Union, and international security partners on how to mitigate post-coup security vacuums, preserve counter-terrorism momentum, and design governance structures resilient to both unconstitutional power seizures and extremist exploitation.

### 3. Methodology

This study employs a Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA) alongside descriptive statistical techniques to investigate the security implications of political instability in Francophone West Africa. It examines Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, with Guinea serving as a comparative control, over the period 2015–2024 to capture both pre- and post-coup trends in terrorist activity. Data sources include the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) for granular conflict event data, the Global Terrorism Database (GTD) for extremist incidents and fatalities, and ECOWAS and African Union policy documents for regional responses, supplemented by news archives and policy briefs for contextual analysis. The analysis contrasts patterns of terrorist incidents, fatalities, and geographic spread before and after coups to identify changes in intensity and scope. QCA is used to discern causal linkages across cases, while descriptive statistics illustrate trends. Particular attention is paid to political–military restructuring, the withdrawal of French and European forces, and the pivot toward alternative security partnerships, notably with non-traditional allies such as Russia.

This approach addresses a critical research gap: while existing literature often isolates coups and terrorism, this study systematically evaluates their interdependence. By integrating empirical datasets with qualitative context, the methodology ensures a rigorous, multi-dimensional understanding of how unconstitutional regime changes reshape security governance and exacerbate extremist threats in West Africa.

#### **Regional Context: Coups and Conflict in Francophone West Africa**

Francophone West Africa has entered a period of acute political and security turbulence, marked by a series of military takeovers that have reshaped the region’s governance and security architecture. The Sahel—stretching across Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger—has long been an epicentre of militant Islamist insurgency, but the post-2020 wave of coups has coincided with a sharp escalation in extremist violence and the erosion of cooperative security frameworks. This emerging coup–terrorism nexus represents not only a domestic governance crisis for affected states but also a destabilizing force for the entire sub-region, given the porous borders and transnational nature of militant networks (ACLED, 2024; GTD, 2023).

#### ***Overview of the Sahel Security Crisis Pre-Coup Era***

Before the onset of the recent coups, the security landscape in Francophone West Africa was already deteriorating. The fallout from the 2012 Malian crisis—sparked by a separatist rebellion in the north and compounded by jihadist infiltration—had fragmented state authority in vast rural zones (Lacher, 2020). French-led counterterrorism interventions, notably Operation Serval (2013) and Operation Barkhane (2014), alongside regional missions such as the G5 Sahel Joint Force, sought to contain militant expansion. However, despite tactical gains, governance vacuums persisted in peripheral areas, enabling groups affiliated with al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) to entrench their influence.

In Burkina Faso, the security crisis intensified after 2015, when cross-border attacks from Mali’s insurgent strongholds spread southwards into the Sahel, Centre-Nord, and Est regions. Similarly, Niger—while comparatively stable politically—was grappling with the dual threat of ISGS activity in the west and Boko Haram/ISWAP incursions in the southeast (Diffa region). Across the Sahel, the absence of coherent state presence in remote zones facilitated a cycle in which militant taxation, targeted killings, and community manipulation eroded trust in national institutions, setting the stage for the political upheavals to follow.

#### ***Coup Timelines and Key Political Events***

The first in the recent series of coups occurred in Mali in August 2020, when President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita was ousted amid protests over corruption, electoral disputes, and insecurity. A transitional government was formed but failed to address key grievances, culminating in a second coup in May 2021 led by Colonel Assimi Goïta. Shortly thereafter, relations with France deteriorated sharply, resulting in the termination of defence agreements and the expulsion of French troops in 2022—moves framed domestically as assertions of sovereignty but which significantly disrupted joint counterterrorism operations (Siegle, 2021).

In Burkina Faso, a military takeover in January 2022, led by Lieutenant Colonel Paul-Henri Damiba, was justified on grounds of deteriorating security, yet within months, continued jihadist advances precipitated his removal by Captain Ibrahim Traoré in September 2022. Niger followed in July 2023, when the presidential guard detained President Mohamed Bazoum and General Abdourahamane Tchiani assumed leadership. Niger's coup not only upended one of the West's key security partnerships in the Sahel but also heightened strategic anxieties over uranium exports crucial to French nuclear energy (IEA, 2023).

These coups share common features: public disillusionment with civilian governments, mounting security failures, and populist nationalist rhetoric often intertwined with anti-French sentiment and overtures toward alternative security partners, notably Russia (Handy, 2023).

### ***Mapping Militant Activity Hotspots and Cross-Border Insurgent Flows***

Post-coup environments have witnessed a discernible surge in militant operations, with hotspots spreading along strategic borderlands. In Mali, ACLED data show that civilian targeting and complex assaults intensified in the tri-border Liptako–Gourma zone after the withdrawal of French and European special forces. The vacuum created has been exploited by Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) and ISGS, who now operate with relative impunity across the Mali–Burkina Faso–Niger frontier.

Burkina Faso has recorded some of the fastest territorial gains by insurgent groups in the region, with militant control or influence extending over 40% of national territory by mid-2023 (Crisis Group, 2023). Key transit corridors such as the Boucle du Mouhoun and Est regions have become staging grounds for cross-border raids into northern Côte d'Ivoire, Togo, and Benin, signalling a southward expansion of jihadist activity. In Niger, militant pressure remains concentrated in Tillabéri and Tahoua (ISGS) and in Diffa (Boko Haram/ISWAP), with insurgent mobility facilitated by the absence of coordinated multinational operations following the country's suspension from ECOWAS security mechanisms post-coup.

While existing studies have addressed either the proliferation of coups in West Africa (Powell & Thyne, 2011) or the evolution of Sahelian jihadist insurgencies (Thurston, 2020), the specific interactive mechanisms by which coups reshape insurgent behaviour remain under-examined. This paper advances the argument that unconstitutional regime changes disrupt established chains of security cooperation, undermine intelligence-sharing, and reconfigure geopolitical alignments in ways that directly affect militant operational calculus. Furthermore, the emerging preference for alternative security partnerships—particularly with Russia's Wagner Group—introduces new dynamics whose implications for counterterrorism effectiveness remain poorly understood in both scholarly and policy domains.

By systematically mapping coup timelines against militant activity patterns, this study seeks to illuminate the causal pathways linking political instability to terrorism in Francophone West Africa, offering insights with direct relevance for ECOWAS conflict prevention, African Union security doctrine, and the design of resilient governance systems in fragile states.

### **A. Disruption of Security Operations**

Post-coup political transitions in Francophone West Africa have consistently diverted military priorities away from counterinsurgency operations towards regime consolidation and internal power management. In Mali (2020, 2021), Burkina Faso (2022), and Niger (2023), armed forces redirected resources to securing capitals, detaining political rivals, and suppressing dissent, often at the expense of frontline operations against jihadist insurgents (ICG, 2023). This reallocation has weakened both the tempo and coordination of military campaigns in rural conflict zones, creating operational vacuums exploited by armed groups such as Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) and Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS).

The collapse of the G5 Sahel Joint Force following Mali's withdrawal in May 2022 exemplifies the institutional disruption caused by coups. Once a central pillar of regional security cooperation, the G5's disintegration reduced the capacity for coordinated cross-border operations, limiting intelligence sharing and joint offensives (Tull, 2023). Similar fractures have emerged within ECOWAS security frameworks, as political sanctions on coup regimes further constrained inter-state military cooperation. The operational impact of these disruptions has been particularly acute along tri-border areas, where militant mobility relies on porous frontiers and the absence of synchronized patrols.

### **B. Foreign Troop Withdrawals and Geopolitical Realignment**

Another critical post-coup dynamic is the accelerated withdrawal of foreign security forces—particularly French Operation Barkhane and European Takuba Task Force contingents—from Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. In Mali, the junta's decision to terminate defense agreements with France in 2022, citing violations of sovereignty, precipitated the departure of over 2,400 French troops, dismantling forward operating bases that had been central to intelligence and rapid response capabilities (Charbonneau, 2022). Burkina Faso and Niger have since followed suit, expelling French military personnel in 2023 amid similar nationalist rhetoric.

This withdrawal has coincided with an increasing presence of Russian security contractors, most prominently the Wagner Group, whose deployment in Mali (since late 2021) has been framed by host governments as an assertion of strategic autonomy (Stronski, 2023). However, open-source intelligence and UN human rights reporting indicate that Wagner deployments have focused heavily on regime protection and elite security rather than expansive counter-terrorism operations, raising doubts about their long-term effectiveness in degrading insurgent networks. The pivot towards non-traditional partners such as Russia and, in some cases, Turkey reflects a broader geopolitical realignment that reshapes external influence in the Sahel but also risks deepening international isolation from Western development and security assistance frameworks.

### **C. Terrorism Escalation Patterns**

Event-based datasets indicate a sharp escalation in both the frequency and lethality of terrorist attacks in Mali and Burkina Faso in the aftermath of recent coups, with incidents increasing by over 30% in the twelve months following regime change (ACLED, 2024). These surges are particularly pronounced in peripheral regions—Mopti, Gao, and the Sahel region of Burkina Faso—where state security presence has thinned due to redeployments towards urban centers.

Comparative analysis reveals important divergences: while Mali and Burkina Faso saw intensified violence, Guinea's 2021 coup did not produce a parallel rise in terrorist activity, largely because the country lacks the entrenched jihadist presence and cross-border insurgent networks characteristic of the central Sahel (Dowd, 2022). This suggests that the coup-terrorism nexus is contingent upon pre-existing insurgent infrastructure and geographic vulnerability rather than being a uniform outcome of unconstitutional regime changes. Nonetheless, the data underscores that in high-risk theaters, coups disrupt counter-terrorism continuity and embolden militant actors.

#### **D. Political Legitimacy and Local Support for Insurgents**

Coups also erode political legitimacy, particularly where juntas fail to deliver rapid improvements in security or governance. In Mali and Burkina Faso, initial public demonstrations in support of military takeovers—often fueled by anti-French sentiment—gave way to frustration as violence persisted or worsened (Thurston, 2023). This erosion of trust creates fertile recruitment conditions for jihadist groups, which frame their struggle as resistance against both illegitimate national elites and foreign intervention.

Furthermore, international sanctions and the suspension of development aid in response to coups have reduced fiscal space for social services and local security initiatives. In several documented cases, communities in contested areas have turned to insurgent groups for dispute resolution, protection, or economic survival, thereby deepening insurgent entrenchment (Cold-Ravnkilde & Albrecht, 2021). The perception that coups sever beneficial international ties—without delivering tangible domestic security gains—thus accelerates the drift of local populations towards armed non-state actors. The findings demonstrate that the coup–terrorism nexus in Francophone West Africa operates through mutually reinforcing pathways: operational disruption, geopolitical realignment, escalatory violence patterns, and legitimacy deficits. These processes jointly undermine counter-terrorism resilience and heighten regional instability, particularly in contexts where insurgent groups already possess strong territorial footholds. While nationalist rhetoric and strategic diversification of partnerships offer short-term political capital to coup regimes, they have yet to translate into sustained security improvements, leaving the region vulnerable to further militant expansion.

#### **4. Discussion**

##### ***Interpreting the Nexus: Are Coups the Cause or a Symptom of Insecurity?***

The recurrence of military coups in Francophone West Africa—exemplified by Mali (2020, 2021), Burkina Faso (2022), and Niger (2023)—raises the question of whether coups are primarily a driver of insecurity or a manifestation of pre-existing fragility. The evidence suggests a mutually reinforcing relationship. In several cases, coups have emerged from deteriorating security environments where extremist groups, particularly jihadists linked to al-Qaeda and the Islamic State, had already eroded state authority (Thurston, 2020). Military juntas justify their takeovers by citing civilian governments' failures to curb terrorism, yet the disruptions caused by unconstitutional regime changes often deepen the very insecurity they claim to address. In Mali, for instance, the 2020 coup occurred amid spiralling insurgent violence in the Sahel, but subsequent political instability undermined counter-insurgency coordination and enabled militant expansion into previously secure zones. This cyclical dynamic highlights the difficulty of disentangling cause from symptom in the coup–terrorism nexus.

##### ***Variation across Cases: Divergent Security Outcomes***

Although coups share broad structural triggers, their security impacts vary significantly across cases. In Mali and Burkina Faso, post-coup transitions have been followed by measurable surges in terrorist attacks and fatalities (ACLED, 2024), driven by fractured command structures, stalled security sector reforms, and strained relations with external partners. In contrast, some coups—such as the 2008 Mauritanian military takeover—produced less severe immediate deterioration, largely due to the regime's capacity to quickly consolidate power, maintain security alliances, and re-engage regional partners. These differences point to mediating factors including the cohesion of post-coup leadership, the resilience of state institutions, and the ability to sustain external security cooperation. Where juntas have failed to address governance deficits or have alienated traditional allies, militant groups have been quick to exploit the resulting vacuums.

##### ***The Role of External Actors: France, Russia, and ECOWAS***

External actors shape both the trajectory of coups and their security consequences. France's long-standing military presence in the Sahel, rooted in post-colonial defence

agreements (Englebert, 2009), has been a double-edged sword—providing counter-terrorism capacity while fuelling nationalist backlash and anti-French sentiment. In Mali and Burkina Faso, juntas leveraged populist anti-French narratives to legitimise their rule, culminating in the expulsion of French forces and the suspension of joint operations. Russia, by contrast, has positioned itself as an alternative security partner, offering military assistance through the Wagner Group and cultivating symbolic solidarity (Siegle, 2021). ECOWAS has sought to enforce anti-coup norms through sanctions and diplomatic isolation, yet its interventions have sometimes been perceived as externally imposed, further complicating its legitimacy among local populations. The interplay of these external influences reshapes the security landscape, often with immediate implications for counter-terrorism effectiveness.

#### ***Normative and Policy Implications: Erosion of Anti-Coup Norms***

Repeated unconstitutional changes of government in Francophone West Africa undermine the African Union (AU) and ECOWAS's normative frameworks designed to deter military takeovers. The inability to enforce sustained transitions to democratic governance weakens regional commitments to constitutional rule, emboldening future coup plotters. This erosion of norms is particularly concerning for counter-terrorism strategy, as it disrupts the institutional continuity and multilateral trust required for joint security operations. In Mali, the suspension of regional security cooperation mechanisms following the coup stalled intelligence sharing and cross-border military operations, offering extremist groups new operational space. Without credible enforcement of anti-coup protocols, fragile states risk being caught in a cycle where political instability and insecurity become mutually reinforcing.

#### ***Implications for Counter-Terrorism Strategy in Fragile States***

The findings underscore the need to re-calibrate counter-terrorism approaches in politically unstable environments. Post-coup regimes require tailored engagement strategies that balance normative commitments to democratic governance with pragmatic measures to sustain operational counter-terrorism capacity. Blanket isolation or withdrawal of security support, while consistent with anti-coup principles, may inadvertently create vacuums exploited by militant actors. A more adaptive framework could involve conditional security assistance tied to clear governance benchmarks, parallel diplomatic efforts to accelerate political transitions, and investment in locally rooted conflict resolution mechanisms. Furthermore, regional actors must develop contingency plans for maintaining cross-border counter-terrorism coordination even during political crises, to prevent extremist groups from exploiting transitional fragility.

#### ***4.1 Synthesis and Research Gap***

This study contributes to the emerging literature by conceptualising the coup–terrorism nexus not as a linear cause-effect relationship but as a complex feedback loop shaped by governance breakdowns, security vacuums, and shifting geopolitical alignments. While existing research often treats political instability and terrorism in isolation, the Francophone West African experience demonstrates the need for integrated analysis that accounts for how political legitimacy, external partnerships, and institutional resilience interact to shape security outcomes. Future research should employ longitudinal, mixed-method approaches to disentangle causal pathways, assess the effectiveness of post-coup counter-terrorism interventions, and explore how regional security architectures can adapt to recurrent political shocks.

### **5. Conclusion and Policy Recommendations**

#### **Conclusion**

The findings of this study demonstrate that the resurgence of military coups in Francophone West Africa—particularly in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger—has intensified the region's vulnerability to terrorism by eroding state capacity, disrupting regional security cooperation, and triggering geopolitical realignments that weaken established counter-terrorism frameworks. Coups do not occur in isolation; rather, they reshape political authority in ways that create permissive environments for extremist

groups to expand their operations. By dismantling fragile democratic institutions and weakening civilian oversight of the security sector, post-coup regimes inadvertently open operational and ideological space for militant actors. This reinforces the argument that political instability and terrorism in the region are mutually reinforcing phenomena, each amplifying the other in a destructive cycle (Aning & Edu-Afful, 2023).

Theoretically, this study advances the literature on regime change and security outcomes by framing coups and terrorism as interconnected elements within a broader security–governance nexus. It moves beyond siloed analyses of political instability and violent extremism, illustrating how regime type, institutional resilience, and external alignments shape the security landscape in fragile states. In doing so, it responds to a critical research gap on how unconstitutional changes of government disrupt counter-terrorism operations at both national and regional levels (Koulibaly, 2024).

From a policy perspective, breaking the coup–terrorism cycle demands a holistic strategy that integrates governance reform, security sector resilience, and regional coordination. ECOWAS and the African Union must recalibrate their frameworks to address the dual threat of political instability and violent extremism simultaneously, ensuring that counter-terrorism operations remain operational during political transitions. Likewise, external security partnerships—whether with France, the United States, or emerging actors such as Russia—must be designed to survive leadership changes, avoiding abrupt operational vacuums that armed groups can exploit.

### **Policy Recommendations**

- 1. Re-frame Regional Security Architecture Beyond Regime Legitimacy:**  
ECOWAS and the African Union must recalibrate sanctions and diplomatic engagement to balance the defense of constitutional order with pragmatic security coordination. Complete diplomatic isolation of juntas often disrupts counterterrorism operations, creating opportunities for extremist expansion. A dual-track approach—political pressure alongside conditional security cooperation—should be institutionalized.
- 2. Strengthen Civil–Military Relations and Security Sector Governance:**  
Donors and regional bodies should prioritize long-term professionalization of armed forces, including accountability mechanisms, merit-based promotions, and civilian oversight. Military politicization remains a key driver of coups; reforms must insulate the armed forces from partisan politics while improving operational capacity against insurgent threats.
- 3. Localize Counter-terrorism Strategies:**  
Military responses must be complemented by locally grounded stabilization initiatives—community policing, youth employment programs, and targeted development in high-risk zones. Overreliance on kinetic operations without addressing governance deficits has repeatedly failed to yield sustainable security gains.
- 4. Diversify International Security Partnerships:**  
Overdependence on any single foreign partner—whether France, Russia, or the U.S.—creates vulnerability to geopolitical shifts. West African states should build diversified security and intelligence-sharing arrangements, ensuring operational continuity regardless of external political realignments.
- 5. Institutionalize Early-Warning and Preventive Diplomacy Mechanisms:**  
A permanent ECOWAS–civil society early-warning platform should be established to monitor both coup risks and extremist activity. Data-driven risk assessments could enable pre-emptive interventions before governance breakdowns escalate into coups or armed insurgencies.
- 6. Link Humanitarian Response to Security Stabilization:**  
Displacement, food insecurity, and humanitarian crises in the Sahel directly feed extremist recruitment. Humanitarian agencies and security actors must coordinate

to ensure that aid delivery is integrated into stabilization strategies, reducing the socio-economic vulnerabilities that armed groups exploit. If implemented in a coherent, coordinated manner, these measures could disrupt the coup–terrorism feedback loop and lay the groundwork for a more resilient political and security order in Francophone West Africa. The challenge is not simply to respond to the latest crisis, but to rebuild governance structures that can withstand both insurgent violence and unconstitutional military takeovers—anchoring the region’s stability in legitimacy, accountability, and shared security.

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