

THE WIDER WORLD

**Sub-Saharan Africa:
Defining the Sahel and its Importance**

**By Diane Chido
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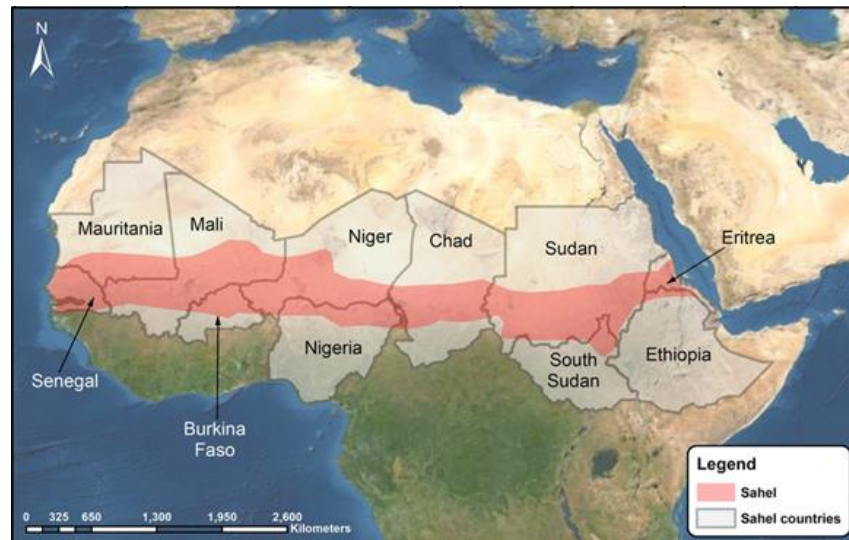
The “forever war” officially ended on December 31, 2022. This is the term often applied to the Global War on Terrorism, also affectionately or derisively called the GWOT, in foreign policy circles. But this war is not over because terrorists ceased to operate or exist; it is because we have redefined “success” and possibly “ending” in terms of war.

The United States began this war in earnest when it attacked Afghanistan in 2001, just days after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, and expanded it in 2003 to Iraq, which we now know only made things much, much worse. While we left Iraq officially in 2011 and more spectacularly left Afghanistan in December 2021, the U.S. government did not declare the war over exactly. Rather, it informed U.S. service members that December 31, 2022 was the last day they would be able to apply for National Defense (GWOT) service medals. Thus, the war ended then.

Yet, those we call terrorists have not left the battlefield. They just moved it. After American combat operations ended in Iraq, the civil war between Iraqi Sunni and Shi’a Muslims and ethnic Kurds continued. In addition, a new group entered the space we had left behind almost immediately: the Islamic State group or IS, the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria.

Now, al-Qaida, which originally conducted the 9/11 operations, and IS, although the two do not get along even though their agendas are similar, have moved their central focus to the Sahel. Not a country, this is another geographic area: a

northern part of Sub-Saharan Africa.[i] The northernmost tan part on the map shown below is the Sahara Desert, politically referred to as the Maghreb. The countries intersected by the Sahel are often partly desert, partly temperate climates, which results in societies that are deeply divided in the way they live. They are often Islamic and often mixed with Muslims, Christians, and animists, who worship ancient, native gods and ancestor spirits.



The Sahel region in Sub-Saharan Africa

The word *sahel* derives from Arabic, meaning coast or shore. In that language and the cultures that live in such arid regions, the desert is considered to be an ocean of sand, so this more livable but still very dry region is the coast of that desert.

When Osama bin Laden first formed al-Qaida in the 1990s, after the Soviets had left Afghanistan and left him with an army and lots of U.S.-supplied weapons, he created a movement, which in Arabic means “the base.” It was intended to be a globally distributed ideational space of like-minded people who wanted to end Jewish and western hegemony over Muslim lands.

To do so, bin Laden used the vast fortune his father had made in construction in Saudi Arabia to offer weapons, training, and Islamic instruction for groups as disparate as Somali warlords, Chechen rebels in southern Russia, Abu Sayyaf brigands in the Philippines, and other “cells” around the world.

Oversimplifying, many of these were Islamic in name only and were mainly criminal gangs and nationalist separatists who used Islam to portray themselves as different from and more just than the majority where they were marginalized. Aligning their movements with this wealthy global one had obvious attractions

but the most significant, and that most often misunderstood by the West, was prestige. To recruit fellow Chechens to fight against Moscow was one thing, but to offer the opportunity to join a global jihad (struggle) against all oppressors was a much more attractive marketing approach.

Then-President Barack Obama underestimated the new breed of jihadis who arose as IS and who wanted more than bin Laden had promised, seeking instead to form a theocratic state where people lived exactly as they believed the Quran decreed 1,400 years ago. Obama called them the “junior varsity team.”[ii] He may have been right in 2014, but they were younger and hungrier than bin Laden had been, and they learned from his experience. Most of them had been imprisoned in Iraq by the U.S. and learned much about us as well.

Bin Laden considered himself a messenger of the Prophet Muhammad, but Islamic State group founder Ibrahim Awad Ibrahim Ali al-Badri, styled himself as a near reincarnation of the prophet’s close aide, Abu Bakr, calling himself Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. Abu Bakr mimicked Muhammad’s habits and had become a respected religious leader in a U.S.-run Iraqi prison, recruiting from the inside. He is now long gone and has been replaced by iterations of increasingly more brutal leaders, but the nature of IS has also changed. By using master recruiters from specific areas oppressed by majorities, his cells invoked individual grievances against local governments to build a movement of like-minded individual groups again adopting the Islamic State name as a marketing tool.

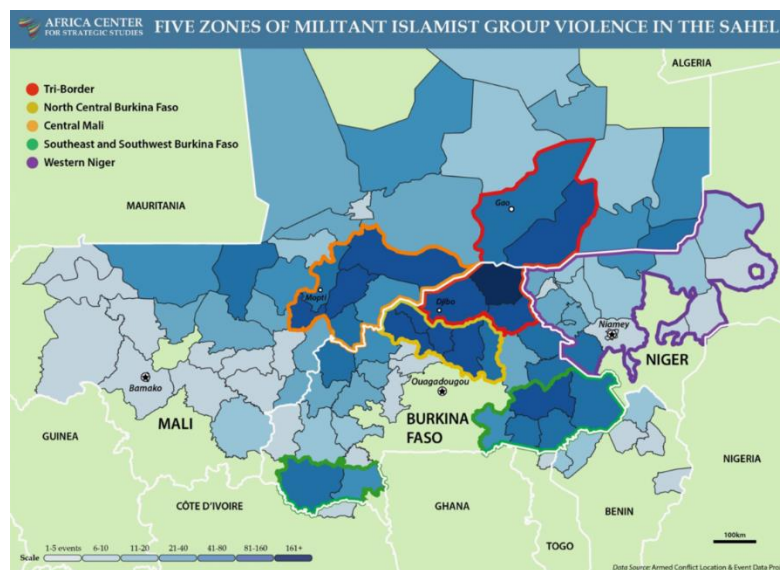
In military parlance, there is a concept called DDRR: Disarmament, Demobilization, Reintegration, and Reconciliation.[iii] This is what is supposed to happen at the end of a conflict to ensure those in rebellion lose both their fighting tools (D), and their basing and ability to move as one (D), while learning new skills to be able to support their families by other than violent means (R), and are being held accountable for what they have done and are able to atone and again become full members of society (R).

This is what is supposed to happen, but once the first two Ds are completed, usually by members of a legitimate military or the United Nations or some other broker, the work gets much more complicated, and the funding usually stops after the Ds since the conflict is considered over. This causes conflict to resurge with experienced and hungry militants in need of work.

The Islamic State fighters concentrated in the Levant were defeated in 2017, but there was no DDRR process. Those remaining did not just fade away, they migrated, along with massive numbers of civilians fleeing them. These combatants went all over the world, a story for another day, but they had established networks in Yemen and in the Sahel. This is mainly where they continued to stir up trouble.

In 2017, four American soldiers were killed in an ambush in Niger, a country in the Sahel.[iv] American citizens wondered where this place was and why there were U.S. soldiers there.[v] Even members of Congress, including U.S. Senator Bob Casey, D-Pa., famously asked this question – and *they* are responsible for spending our tax dollars on the military among other things. Well, there are myriad U.S. soldiers and contractors in Niger, and they are not leaving. We have built a billion-dollar drone base there to conduct operations around the region. This is no small investment to just hand over to a local government.

The second map indicates just how complex this fight is today. There is a dizzying array of militant groups fighting over territory as well as hearts and minds. Sudan’s latest crisis is in the headlines only because it has been taking place in public, in the national capital. That fight, by the way, has nothing to do with what we call terrorism. It is a personal battle over control of power and resources, essentially, politics in a deadly form.



Five zones of militant Islamic State group violence in the Sahel [vi]

Today there are at least 8,000 American personnel in the Sahel. Their main job is training and advising African soldiers and intelligence officers to manage the fight against IS and other extremist groups. This is called Security Force Assistance.[vii] We do it all the time. It has the benefit of letting others fight in place of our soldiers, so the casualties (usually) do not end up as headlines in the American press. It “localizes the fight” and lets “Africans solve African problems.”

It also costs training dollars but generates billions of dollars in international arms and materiel sales. When we train our foreign partners, we train on our equipment. As they are to carry on with the fight, we sell them our arms or loan them funds to buy them, a process that generates profits and jobs for our defense industry.

While the “forever war” – the Global War on Terrorism – was declared “over,” or ended, on Dec. 31, 2022, we see not a conclusion; rather, we are reading the next chapter as it is being written in a different place. The *2023 Global Terrorism Index* reported that the Sahel is now the “epicenter” of global terrorism with 43% of terrorist-related deaths taking place in that region. The next few articles will offer greater detail about what is happening in this dynamic region, and will explore America’s role in the conflict shifted to this area.

References

- [i] Sahel Map reference available [here](#) accessed on July 7, 2023.
- [ii] “Barack Obama says his comment about extremists being a JV team “wasn’t specifically referring to” Islamic State,” Politifact, September 7, 2014, available [here](#) accessed on July 7, 2023.
- [iii] “Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration,” *UN Peacekeeping*, available [here](#), accessed on July 7, 2023.
- [iv] “Pentagon ends reviews of Niger ambush that killed 4 soldiers,” *AP News*, June 6, 2019 available [here](#) accessed on July 7, 2023.
- [v] “Key senators say they didn’t know the US had troops in Niger,” *CNN*, October 23, 2017, available [here](#) accessed on July 7, 2023.
- [vi] Militants in the Sahel Map: “Five Zones of Militant Islamist Violence in the Sahel, Africa Center for Strategic Studies, September 26, 2022 available [here](#) accessed on July 7, 2023.
- [vii] Joint Force Development, *Join Chiefs of Staff* website, available [here](#) accessed on July 7, 2023.

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