

Mass Displacement and Violent Extremism in the Sahel: A Vicious Circle?

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Abstract

With the Sahel crisis entering its tenth year, the indiscriminate violence faced by local populations trapped between various al-Qaeda and Islamic State-affiliated organisations, other non-state armed groups, and counter-terrorism operations, is forcing ever-growing numbers of civilians to flee, resulting in over 2.8 million people being forcibly displaced across Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso. Frequently representing the only coping strategy available, displacement however exposes internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees to even more precarious situations, while also raising important challenges for their host communities. Through an initial exploration of the complex interconnections between mass displacement and violent extremism, this policy brief aims to assess how displacement simultaneously constitutes one of the most tangible symptoms as well as a potentially aggravating factor of the Sahel crisis. More specifically, it considers the potential for mass displacement, which results from rising (extremist) violence, to perpetuate conditions conducive to violent extremism by increasing local tensions and grievances that have been known to be exploited by violent extremist groups.

Keywords: violent extremism, Sahel, IDPs, refugees, displacement, migration, counter-terrorism

Introduction

For over a decade, the Sahel region has been confronted with the presence of a myriad of non-state armed groups, including various al-Qaeda and Islamic State-affiliated organisations.¹ As violence has continued to intensify and spread, especially across the tri-border area between Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso, a parallel but intrinsically related crisis has progressively emerged. Confronted with terrorist attacks, combined with high levels of banditry, intercommunal tensions and organised crime, as well as the effects of climate change and the depletion of resources, ever-growing numbers of people have been forced to flee and find refuge in neighbouring regions or countries. This has resulted in over 2.4 million internally displaced persons (IDPs)² and 365,000 refugees³ (hereafter jointly referred to as “displaced persons”).⁴

Used as a resilience mechanism, allowing people to – at least temporarily – distance themselves from the immediate threat of an attack, displacement often exposes these populations to even more precarious situations, while raising important challenges for their host communities. Having left their belongings and livelihoods behind, displaced populations may suffer from dire conditions in refugee camps and face restricted access to economic opportunities and political participation,⁵ while being exposed to various forms of violence within and outside camps. Putting further pressure on scarce – and often disputed – lands and natural resources, the massive influx of displaced populations also has the potential to create tensions among host community members, who may notably (either in reality or self-perception) be excluded from aid and support provided to displaced persons. While these dynamics are problematic in themselves from a humanitarian perspective, they may additionally create resentment and grievances that may be exploited by violent extremist organisations (VEOs).

Building a better understanding of the complex interactions between mass displacement, local conflict dynamics, and violent extremism is crucial to provide adequate and sustainable responses to the ongoing security and humanitarian disaster in the Sahel. Yet, research into displacement, its causes, and its consequences throughout the region remains scant, notably due to a lack of primary data.⁶ Connecting findings from existing literature with primary data collected as part

1 This paper focuses on the tri-border area between Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso (hereafter jointly referred to as the Sahel region). Violent extremist groups operating throughout the region notably include the al-Qaeda affiliated organisations regrouped within the Jamaat Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM), including al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Ansar Dine, al-Mourabitoun, and the Katiba Macina, as well as the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS).

2 For the purpose of this paper, internally displaced persons (IDPs) are defined as “persons or groups of persons who have been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence, in particular as a result of or in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalized violence, violations of human rights or natural or human-made disasters, and who have not crossed an internationally recognized State border.” See: UN Commission on Human Rights, Report of the Representative of the Secretary-General, Mr. Francis M. Deng, submitted pursuant to Commission resolution 1997/39. Addendum: Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, 11 February 1998, E/CN.4/1998/53/Add.2, <https://www.refworld.org/docid/3d4f95e11.html>

3 A refugee is defined as “a person who, owing to a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it.” See: UNHCR, “What is a refugee?”, <https://www.unhcr.org/what-is-a-refugee.html>

4 UNHCR, “Sahel crisis,” <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/sahelcrisis> [accessed on 16 May 2022]

5 Sophie Douce, “Au Burkina Faso, les déplacés sont les grands oubliés des élections de novembre,” *Le Monde*, 26 October, 2020. <https://www.observatoirepharos.com/pays/burkina-faso/sous-participation-des-deplaces-internes-au-processus-electoral-du-burkina-faso/>

6 On account of security, local and international journalists have been banned from accessing refugee camps and IDP sites in Burkina Faso. See: Henry Wilkins, “With Media Blocked, Burkina Faso’s Displaced Denied a Voice, Journalists Say,” *VoA News*, 17 June, 2021. https://www.voanews.com/a/press-freedom_media-blocked-burkina-

of ICCT's past research,⁷ this policy brief aims to explore this crucial, and yet often overlooked, aspect of the Sahelian crisis.⁸ It aims to assess the extent to which displacement represents “simultaneously a symptom of the crisis and a driver of the worsening emergency.”⁹

Following a brief overview of the region's fast-growing displacement crisis, this paper will therefore first consider displacement as a symptom of the security crisis and discuss to what extent it results from rising extremist violence. It will then explore whether situations of mass displacement might in turn represent an aggravating factor of the current crisis by examining its impact on both displaced and host communities' security and living conditions, as well as local perceptions and communal interactions, to identify factors and fault lines that may eventually be exploited by VEOs. The objective is to assess the risk of a vicious circle whereby violent extremism fuels mass displacement, which in turn might aggravate local tensions and grievances, thereby fostering conditions conducive to violent extremism. Based on this risk analysis, and taking into account current approaches and programming that targets displaced populations in the region, it identifies tangible recommendations for international and national actors seeking to address these critical challenges.

The Sahel's fast-growing displacement crisis

Crossed by centuries-old trans-Saharan trade routes and populated with important pastoralist communities, the Sahel has a long history of human mobility, notably taking the form of seasonal transhumance, economic migration, and rural exodus. Recent years have however seen unprecedented levels of forced displacement.¹⁰

fasos-displaced-denied-voice-journalists-say/6207147.html

7 This policy brief builds upon primary data collected between October 2020 and April 2021 in 29 selected municipalities across Ménaka and Gao regions in Mali, Centre-Nord, Sahel, and Est regions in Burkina Faso, and Tillabéri region in Niger, as part of the USAID Customary Resilience project. Conducted by ICCT, in collaboration with Clingendael's Conflict Research Unit (CRU), this project aimed to explore the influence of customary authorities on community resilience against violent extremism in the Sahel. While not being at the core of this research, the interviews conducted as part of this study clearly underlined local communities' concerns over the mass displacement of population across the region, and its impact on both displaced and host communities, with nearly a third (190 out of a total of 656) of the semi-structured key informant interviews (KIIs) conducted containing references to displaced populations. For an overview of the project, see: <https://icct.nl/project/usaid-customary-resilience/>

8 Fully cognizant of the sensitivity of establishing connections between migration and security issues, notably due to the risk of turning primary victims of terrorism into potential suspects, this research does not aim to present displaced persons as a direct threat to security and/or a source of violent extremism, but rather seeks to explore the conditions that displaced and host communities are subjected to, and whether such conditions are fuelling local tensions and grievances that may eventually benefit violent extremist groups.

9 Kyle Murphy, “Security Fragmentation Hinders Humanitarian Response in the Sahel,” Centre for Strategic & International Studies (CSIS), November 2020, pp.5-6. https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/201117_Murphy_Security_Fragmentation_Humanitarian_Response_Sahel-2.pdf

10 The transhumance is a seasonal movement of herders and their livestock in search of water and pasture. This practice has long been an effective strategy for the majority of Sahelian herders to adapt to climatic hazards and an opportunistic system for exploiting pastoral resources, taking advantage of the ecological diversity and complementarity between different agro-climatic zones. See: FAO, “La transhumance transfrontalière en Afrique de l'Ouest : Proposition de plan d'action,” June 2012. https://www.inter-reseaux.org/wp-content/uploads/Transhumance_Transfrontalier_en_AO_Rapport_FAO.pdf.

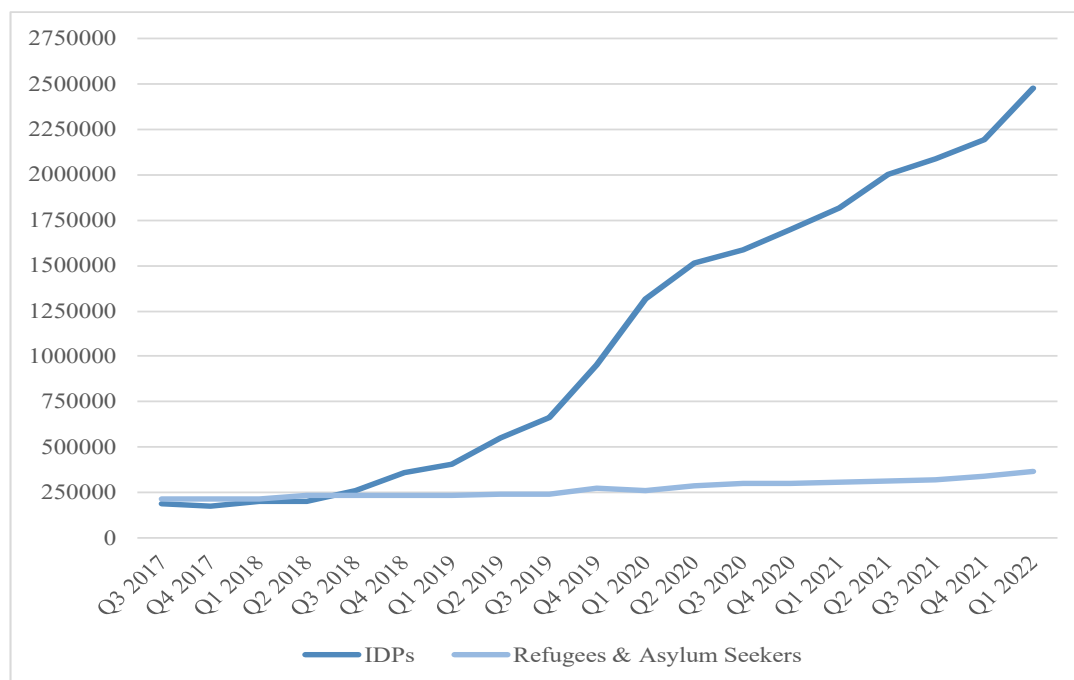


Figure 1. Evolution of forcibly displaced population across the Sahel (Source: UNHCR, OCHA)¹¹

Over the past five years, Sahelian countries have witnessed a dramatic increase particularly in the number of IDPs, which has risen from about 170,000 in mid-2017 to over 2.4 million in early 2022 (see Figure 1 above).¹² Including about 365,000 refugees, this puts the total number of forcibly displaced individuals across Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger at over 2.8 million (see Figures 2 & 3 below).¹³ Displaced populations have also reached neighbouring Mauritania and Chad, which together host more than half a million refugees,¹⁴ and are increasingly forced to seek refuge southward in coastal West African states, including Côte d'Ivoire which has seen about 7,000 Burkinabe refugees entering the country since mid-2021.¹⁵

¹¹ This figure presents the number of IDPs, refugees and asylum seekers present across Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger from September 2017 to March 2022. It is based on UNHCR data, complemented with additional information from OCHA. Sources: UNHCR, "Sahel crisis," <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/sahelcrisis> [accessed on 16 May 2022]; OCHA, "Burkina Faso: Personnes Déplacées Internes," October 2018, <https://reliefweb.int/map/burkina-faso/burkina-faso-personnes-d-plac-es-internes-16-octobre-2018>

¹² UNHCR, "Sahel crisis," <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/sahelcrisis> [accessed on 16 May 2022]

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ UNHCR, "Insecurity drives more Burkinabe into exile, further straining fragile Sahel region," 4 February, 2022, <https://www.unhcr.org/news/briefing/2022/2/61fcf11c4/insecurity-drives-burkinabe-exile-further-straining-fragile-sahel-region.html>

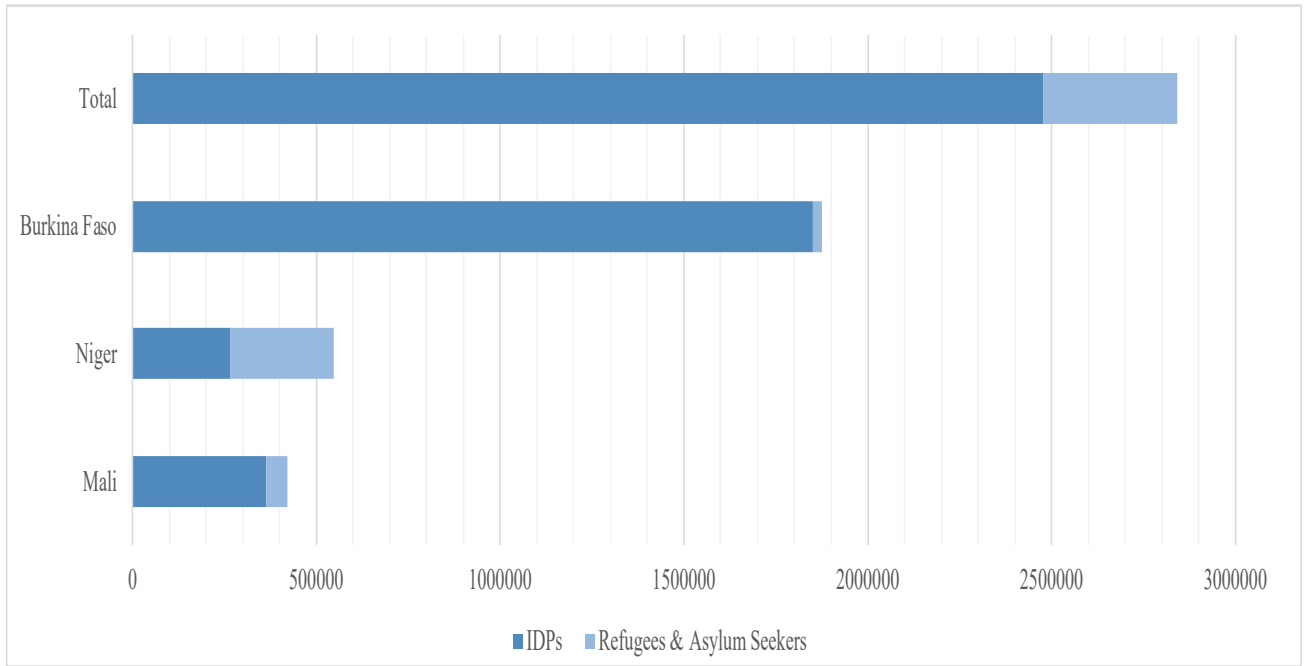


Figure 2. Number of forcibly displaced persons across the Sahel (Source: UNHCR)¹⁶

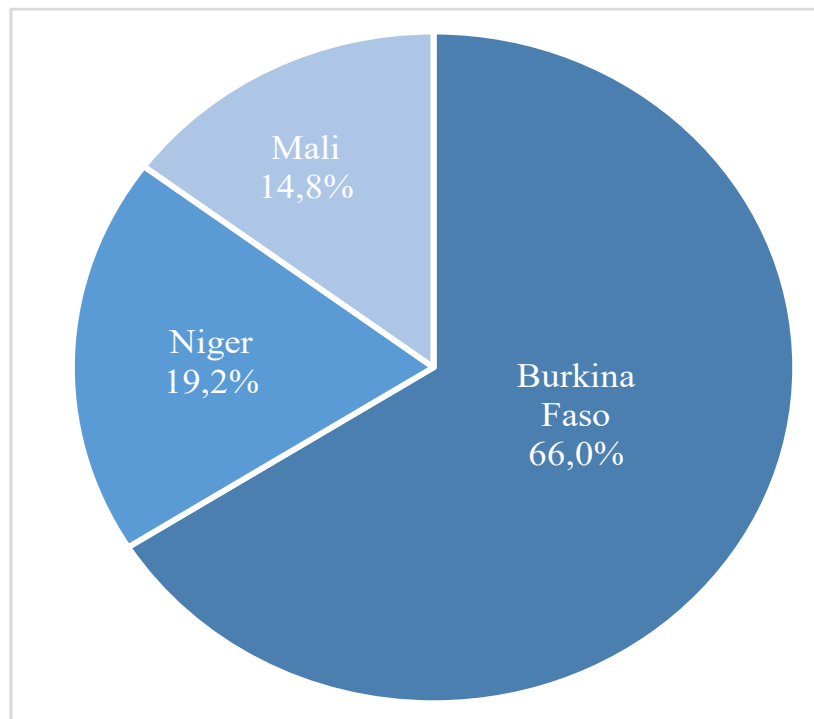


Figure 3. Distribution of forcibly displaced persons across the Sahel (Source: UNHCR)¹⁷

¹⁶ UNHCR, "Sahel crisis," <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/sahelcrisis> [accessed on 16 May 2022]

¹⁷ Ibid.

Hosting over 1.8 million IDPs, Burkina Faso is the most severely impacted,¹⁸ While mostly spared from the spill over effects of the Malian crisis until 2015, the country has since seen a dramatic deterioration of its security situation and is now confronted with “the world’s fastest-growing humanitarian and protection crisis,”¹⁹ with the number of IDPs throughout the country having increased ten-fold between 2018 and 2020.²⁰ Although all regions across the country have been affected, more than half of the IDPs present across the country are concentrated in the Sahel and Centre-Nord regions.²¹ Parts of the Burkinabe population have also sought shelter in neighbouring states.²² Niger has continued to host a greater proportion of refugees and asylum seekers than the two other Sahel states, with around 75 percent of the 280,000 now in Niger being nationals from neighbouring Nigeria and 20 percent coming from Mali.²³ While a large share of forcibly displaced populations across Niger are located in its eastern Diffa region, bordering Boko Haram-affected Nigeria, the number of IDPs in its western Tillabéri and Tahoua regions has more than doubled over the past year.²⁴ Mali, the initial epicentre of the crisis, originally saw many of its nationals fleeing to neighbouring countries,²⁵ but the number of people being internally displaced on its soil has increased by 30 percent over the past year, perhaps a result of the fact that neighbouring countries no longer provide a secure refuge as they once did.²⁶

Displacement as a symptom of the crisis: Moving away from (extremist) violence?

When considering potential interconnections between displacement and (extremist) violence, the first type of relationships usually explored is one of cause-effect. When asked to describe the main crisis affecting their communities, several interviewees pointed to the spread of violent extremism, while depicting the displacement crisis as one of its main symptoms. As noted by one respondent in Burkina Faso, “In the past five years, the biggest crisis that has affected the population is the security situation due to terrorist attacks, because this has resulted in thousands of internally displaced people.”²⁷ Various factors play a role in driving people away from their areas of origin, including poverty, inequalities, environmental stressors, the lack of and/or growing tensions over access to natural resources, among others. Yet, according to the UNHCR, “insecurity is the main driver, made worse by extreme poverty, the COVID-19 pandemic,

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ UNHCR, “Mounting violence forces one million to flee homes in Burkina Faso,” 18 August, 2020. <https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/news/briefing/2020/8/5f3b84914/mounting-violence-forces-million-flee-homes-burkina-faso.html>

²⁰ Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, “Burkina Faso,” Country Information, <https://www.internal-displacement.org/countries/burkina-faso>

²¹ UNHCR, “Sahel crisis,” <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/sahelcrisis> [accessed on 16 May 2022]

²² Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, “Burkina Faso.”

²³ UNHCR, “Niger: Operational Update, December 2021 – January 2022,” 17 February, 2022, <https://reliefweb.int/report/niger/niger-operational-update-december-2021-january-2022>

²⁴ UNHCR, “Decade of Sahel conflict leaves 2.5 million people displaced.” 14 January, 2022, <https://www.unhcr.org/news/briefing/2022/1/61e137ac4/decade-sahel-conflict-leaves-25-million-people-displaced.html>

²⁵ Interview with a local civil servant, Tidermene, Ménaka region, Mali. See also, Interview with a village chief, Tidermene, Ménaka region, Mali: “The challenges are enormous, many of our people have left the commune and even the region because of the insecurity.”

²⁶ Peter Kenny, “Sahel conflict leaves 2.5M people displaced in past decade: UN,” Anadolu Agency, 14 January, 2022, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/africa/sahel-conflict-leaves-25m-people-displaced-in-past-decade-un/2474277>

²⁷ Interview with a traditional authority, Kaya, Centre-Nord region, Burkina Faso.

and the worsening effects of the climate crisis,” with this connection between mass displacement and extremist violence being confirmed by many interviewees.

As far as our village is concerned, the bandits had initially given an ultimatum for the entire village population to leave. When we were told about the ultimatum, we did not believe it was serious. At the end of the ultimatum, the bandits came back into the village. They took the village leaders and beat them up around a well. They beat them so badly that they could not even move. They told them to tell the whole village that if they came back and the people did not leave the village, they would set fire to the village and massacre everyone. It was following this threat that we were forced to leave our village.²⁸

This testimony illustrates how behind displacement can be the necessity to protect oneself from the immediate threat of an attack. This is confirmed by recent trends, which show that the continued increase in forcibly displaced populations has coincided with a progressive rise in violence perpetrated against civilians in the Sahel region (see Figure 4 below).

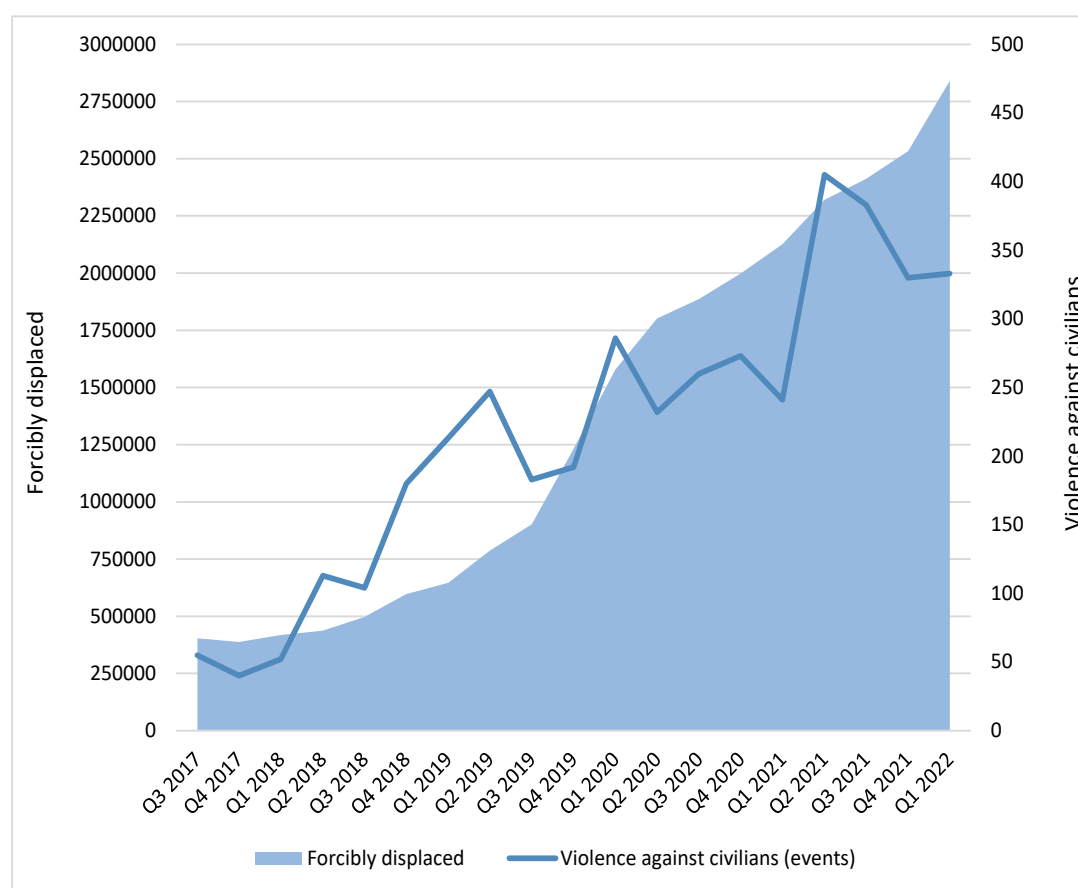


Figure 4. Evolution in violence against civilians and forcibly displaced populations across the Sahel (Source: UNHCR, OCHA, and ACLED)²⁹

28 Interview with a community member, Abala, Tillabéri region, Niger.

29 This figure presents the evolution in the numbers of forcibly displaced populations, including IDPs, refugees and asylum seekers, as well as the evolution in the number of violent events against civilians in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger. It is based on UNHCR data, complemented with additional information from OCHA, as well as ACLED data. Sources: UNHCR, “Sahel crisis,” <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/sahelcrisis> [accessed on 16 May 2022]; OCHA, “Burkina Faso: Personnes Déplacées Internes,” October 2018, <https://reliefweb.int/map/burkina-faso/burkina-faso-personnes-d-plac-es-internes-16-octobre-2018>; ACLED dashboard, <https://acleddata.com/dashboard/#/dashboard> [accessed on 17 May 2022].

Displacement as an aggravating factor of the crisis?

While the previous section showed that displacement constitutes one of the most tangible symptoms of the current security crisis, this section will look at whether and how situations of mass displacement, and their repercussions on both displaced and host communities' security and living conditions, might fuel local grievances and tensions that have historically been exploited by VEOs active throughout the region. The objective is to assess the extent to which displacement, initially caused by rising extremist violence, may in turn perpetuate conditions conducive to the spread of violent extremism.

Post-displacement continuation of violence and impact on intercommunal perceptions

If terrorist violence is among the factors pushing populations to flee, it remains uncertain to what extent displacement represents a successful coping strategy. Displaced people have been subjected to various forms of violence – including sexual and gender-based violence – post-displacement.³⁰ Sites for displaced people have moreover been targeted by (extremist) armed groups, as illustrated by the attack against the refugee site in Intikane, Niger which resulted in three deaths, including two refugees, in May 2020 – an incident that adds to an already extensive list of attacks targeting refugee sites throughout the country.³¹ As previously done with the Tabarey Barey and Mangaizé camps in late 2019,³² the Intikane site was officially closed in June 2021 due to the deteriorating security situation across the region, while sources indicate that the camp had reportedly been infiltrated by jihadist elements.³³ Even efforts deployed to secure camps have not always proved sufficient. Following VEO attacks and ultimatums, many of the 9,000 people living in the Goudoubo camp and 6,500 people living in the Mentaos camps, both in north-east Burkina Faso, had to flee in March 2020.³⁴ In response, the central government, along with the UNHCR, have worked to rehabilitate and reinforce security around the Goudoubo camp – selected to be the sole camp site for the entire Burkinabe Sahel region – allowing for the progressive return of refugees starting in late 2020.³⁵ However, new attacks in November 2021, including the abduction of two refugees followed by a larger assault a week later, forced the 13,000 Malian refugees to desert the camp for a second time in less than two years.³⁶

30 Sam Mednick, "Sex-for-food aid claimed by women in Burkina Faso," The New Humanitarian, 26 July, 2021.

<https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/investigations/2021/7/26/sex-for-food-aid-allegations-in-burkina-faso>

31 France 24, "Niger : attaque meurtrière contre un site de réfugiés maliens," 1 June, 2020, <https://www.france24.com/fr/20200601-niger-attaque-meurtriere-contre-un-site-de-refugies-maliens>

32 RFI, "Le Niger ferme un camps de réfugiés infiltré par des jihadistes à la frontière malienne," 18 June, 2021, <https://www.rfi.fr/fr/afrique/20210618-le-niger-ferme-un-camp-de-refugies-infiltr%C3%A9-par-des-jihadistes-%C3%A0-la-fronti%C3%A8re-malienne>

33 Sam Mednick, "Des milliers de réfugiés maliens fuient les camps du Burkina Faso à la suite d'attaques," The New Humanitarian, 29 May 2020. <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/fr/news/2020/06/26/Mali-Burkina-Faso-refugies-extremistes>

34 Yaya Boudani, "Burkina Faso: sécurisation du camp de Goudebo et réinstallation des réfugiés," RFI, 13 March, 2021. <https://www.rfi.fr/fr/afrique/20210313-burkina-faso-s%C3%A9curisation-du-camp-de-goudebo-et-r%C3%A9installation-des-r%C3%A9fugi%C3%A9s>

35 Nadia Chahed, "Burkina Faso : 13 000 réfugiés maliens chassés de leur camp par des hommes armés (HCR)," Anadolu Agency, 13 November, 2021. <https://www.aa.com.tr/fr/afrique/burkina-13-000-r%C3%A9fugi%C3%A9s-maliens-chass%C3%A9s-de-leur-camp-par-des-hommes-arm%C3%A9s-hcr/2419713>

36 Nadia Chahed, "Burkina Faso : 13 000 réfugiés maliens chassés de leur camp par des hommes armés (HCR)," Anadolu Agency, 13 November, 2021. <https://www.aa.com.tr/fr/afrique/burkina-13-000-r%C3%A9fugi%C3%A9s-maliens-chass%C3%A9s-de-leur-camp-par-des-hommes-arm%C3%A9s-hcr/2419713>

Terrorist groups' motives behind these attacks might be manifold. As part of the raid against the Intikane site, assailants targeted critical infrastructures, notably destroying communication installations, emptying the food storage facility, setting fire to stocks of relief items and cutting off the drinking water supply.³⁷ Local testimonies moreover described how attackers used the successive assaults against the Goudoubo camp to “steal cattle, money and motorcycles”³⁸ as well as medicines.³⁹ While these tactics seem to point to financial gains and vital supplies as a central motive, observers also consider these incidents as an attempt by terrorist groups to further push state presence away and expand their territorial control: “by depopulating the Goudoubo camp, the extremists seek to turn a disputed area into a guerrilla zone.”⁴⁰ Besides the direct benefits VEOs might draw from targeting displaced sites, fostering chronic re-displacement might indirectly profit terrorist organisations. While no evidence confirms it, interviews revealed suspicions from host community members, with some respondents expressing concerns over the potential presence of terrorist elements hiding within displaced populations flows and camps. Referring to Malian refugees, an interviewee noted: “In the case of the refugees, we are watching over them because we don't know who they are. Among them, there could be elements of armed groups.”⁴¹ Similarly, another interviewee described how “Refugees and internally displaced persons are closely monitored by the administrative and customary authorities to prevent the infiltration of certain members of armed groups.”⁴²

Not only does “serial relocation” further hamper the delivery of an effective humanitarian response and arguably increases these populations' vulnerability,⁴³ but these narratives, as well as examples from neighbouring regions show that it also contributes to “turn[ing] countries and communities against refugees, and turns victims into suspects.”⁴⁴ Host communities will be increasingly reluctant to welcome displaced persons if they perceive it as putting them under greater threat, as seen in the Tillabéri region where host communities consider refugees of the Ayerou camp as “being responsible for most of the attacks on the camp's outskirts or in the locality.”⁴⁵ Such incidents might indeed fuel distrust between local and displaced populations, which risk being increasingly regarded as either placing host communities in harm's way by turning them into strategic targets, or even as being sympathetic – if not aligned with – violent extremist groups. Whether real or perceived, such narratives can have devastating consequences as it may lead to further discrimination against the forcibly displaced.

Moreover, attacks in and around IDP sites may in turn trigger interventions from CT forces, which sometimes result in further violence and abuses being committed against displaced populations. In May 2020, following attacks targeting law enforcement near the Mentaou camp, security and defence forces entered the camp in search of suspects, allegedly perpetrating violence against

37 AFP, “Des milliers de personnes ont fui la zone nigérienne d'Intikane après l'attaque jihadiste,” VOA, 3 June, 2020, <https://www.voaafrique.com/a/niger-des-milliers-de-personnes-ont-fui-la-zone-d-intikane-apr%C3%A8s-l-attaque-jihadiste/5447893.html>

38 Mednick, “Des milliers de réfugiés maliens fuient les camps du Burkina Faso à la suite d'attaques,” 29 May 2020.

39 Chahed, “Burkina Faso : 13 000 réfugiés maliens chassés de leur camp par des hommes armés (HCR),” 13 November, 2021.

40 Mednick, “Des milliers de réfugiés maliens fuient les camps du Burkina Faso à la suite d'attaques,” 29 May 2020.

41 Interview with a traditional authority, Ayerou, Tillabéri region, Niger. See also, Interview with a community member, Mané, Centre-Nord region, Burkina Faso: “For the moment, in the commune of Mané, things are fine. There have been no attacks, by the grace of God. But it is very likely that the situation will change if we are not careful, especially given the high number of IDPs. What proves that they are not among the displaced?”

42 Interview with a civil society actor, Abala, Tillabéri region, Niger.

43 Murphy, “Security Fragmentation Hinders Humanitarian Response in the Sahel,” November 2020, pp.5-6.

44 Aimée-Noël Mbiyozo, “How Boko Haram specifically targets displaced people,” Institute for Security Studies, Policy Brief no. 109, November 2017, p.2. <https://issafrica.s3.amazonaws.com/site/uploads/policybrief109.pdf>

45 Grégory Chauzal, “Importing the Malian conflict to the Group of Five Sahel countries: The case of the Ayerou refugee camp in Niger,” SIPRI Commentary, 5 May, 2020. <https://www.sipri.org/commentary/topical-background/2020/importing-malian-conflict-group-five-sahel-countries-case-ayorou-refugee-camp-niger>

refugees, resulting in 32 being injured.⁴⁶ More generally, national armed forces have faced accusations of forced disappearances and extrajudicial executions against IDPs in the region.⁴⁷ Such abuses, are not only condemnable violations in themselves, but are also particularly problematic considering the impact they may have on fuelling grievances against state forces and authorities, which have proved instrumental to terrorists' recruitment strategies.⁴⁸

Impact on local tensions and potential instrumentalisation by VEOs

Violent extremist groups have not solely gained ground in the Sahel through violence; rather, they have also proved capable of entrenching themselves in the local context by instrumentalising and exacerbating existing intra and intercommunal tensions, as well as grievances towards traditional norms and governance actors.⁴⁹ When looking at interconnexions between mass displacement and violent extremism, it is therefore crucial to not only consider its impact on extremist violence, but also on local tensions and conflict dynamics that may eventually benefit violent extremist groups. This section will thus focus on the impact of mass displacement on both displaced and host communities to examine how it may exacerbate grievances which have been known to benefit terrorist organisations' spread across the region.

In addition to the psychological trauma associated with it, forced displacement severely impacts both displaced and host communities' living conditions, which might create frustrations, grievances, and potentially exacerbate resource-driven conflicts. A displaced person interviewed indeed declared:

“We have lost everything, our food stocks, our animals, our possessions, and our dignity.”⁵⁰

Finding themselves without means of subsistence, insufficient food and drinkable water, and limited access to basic services,⁵¹ displaced populations are moreover often housed in precarious and temporary shelters “which cannot withstand the impacts of floods” and other climatic hazards, leading people to flee for the second or third time.⁵² As a result of the Covid-19 pandemic and the lockdown measures subsequently implemented, the socio-economic and humanitarian conditions of these populations have further deteriorated.⁵³ Displaced people thus risk being

46 UNHCR, “Burkina Faso : UNHCR condemns violence against Malian refugees,” 4 May, 2020. <https://www.unhcr.org/news/press/2020/5/5eafedba4/burkina-faso-unhcr-condemns-violence-against-malian-refugees.html>; Yaya Boudani, “Burkina Faso : descente, bastonnade et menaces dans un camps de réfugiés par des FDS,” RFI, 5 May, 2020. <https://www.rfi.fr/fr/afrique/20200505-burkina-faso-descente-bastonnade-et-menaces-camp-r%C3%A9fugi%C3%A9s-fds>

47 Amnesty International, “‘They executed some and brought the rest with them’: Human rights violations by security forces in the Sahel,” June 10, 2020. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/afr37/2318/2020/en/>

48 Corinne Dufka, “Sahel : Atrocities by the security forces are fueling recruitment by armed Islamists,” Human Rights Watch, 1 July, 2020. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/07/01/sahel-atrocities-security-forces-are-fueling-recruitment-armed-islamists>

49 Méryl Demuynck, and Julie Coleman, “Local Governance as a (De-)Legitimising Tool for Competing Violent Extremist Groups in Central Mali,” in *The Rule is for None but Allah: Islamist Approaches to Governance*, eds. Joana Cook and Shiraz Maher (Hurst: forthcoming)

50 Interview with a community member, Abala, Tillabéri region, Niger.

51 Pierre Ozer, Adama Dembele, Simplicie S. Yameogo, Elodie Hut, and Florence de Longueville, “The impact of COVID-19 on the living and survival conditions of internally displaced persons in Burkina Faso,” *World Development Perspectives*, Vol. 25, 2022, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2452292922000017>

52 In addition to temporary shelters and sites, displaced persons stay in host communities, which might include staying with host families, settling on a piece of land often provided by private owners or local authorities, or in public buildings, such as schools. See: Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, “Burkina Faso.”

53 Ozer, Dembele, Yameogo, Hut, and de Longueville, “The impact of COVID-19 on the living and survival conditions

subjected to “daily survival challenges that in some cases added to refugees’ susceptibility to extremist recruitment.”⁵⁴ Some interviewees warned against the risk of seeing disenfranchised displaced people joining the ranks of violent (extremist) groups.

The difficulties that we have are that we have very few resources to be able to satisfy the demand, especially with the massive presence of the IDPs, and this reality puts us in a situation of insecurity insofar as it is the end that justifies the means, which means that if these IDPs do not have enough to eat, it can lead them to accept all kinds of propositions, and the municipality can find itself in a very acute security situation.⁵⁵

Additionally, the massive influx of forcibly displaced persons in “communities already on the brink of food insecurity”⁵⁶ puts further pressure on already scarce—and often disputed—lands and natural resources. While around 2.1 million people were forcibly displaced in late 2021, over 10 million needed humanitarian assistance, and 4.3 million experienced acute food insecurity in Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso,⁵⁷ showing that non-displaced communities are not exempt from deprivation. Against this backdrop, host communities have been exposed to what some described as “the collateral effects of the massive arrival of displaced persons.”⁵⁸ This phenomenon puts further burden on limited basic services, such as education and health infrastructures: “the health centres are filled with patients due to the massive arrival of IDPs in our municipality.”⁵⁹ In regions often characterised by chronic agricultural deficits, food insecurity, and water scarcity, additional pressure exerted on these resources was referred to as a major issue. As one interviewee noted, “The biggest threat beyond terrorism is famine. It’s true that this year’s harvest was good, but because of the IDPs it won’t be enough, because there are more people to feed and we can’t abandon them, so we have to cope with it.”⁶⁰ Another pointed to the lack of water supply: “We don’t have water in this neighbourhood, households are suffering from lack of water. With terrorism, the population has increased and the demand is even greater. We have difficulties in satisfying the population.”⁶¹ More particularly, tensions seem to crystallise around the access to land, as described by an interviewee from Burkina Faso: “We are faced with land problems. We don’t have enough space to accommodate the displaced. The occupation of space often causes grievances between the populations because some have lost their cultivable land.”⁶² Explaining how land disputes can emerge between displaced and host communities, another interviewee noted “with this difficult security situation, people have been displaced and when people arrive with their families they ask for land to cultivate and they are given it, but sometime later others come and say that this land belongs to them or to their grandparents, so they cannot cultivate it.”⁶³

Such dynamics are particularly concerning in a region where terrorist groups have demonstrated their abilities to exploit existing tensions, particularly over land and natural resources, to their

of internally displaced persons in Burkina Faso,” 2022.

54 Barbara H. Sude, “Prevention of Radicalization to Terrorism in Refugee Camps and Asylum Centers,” in Schmid, Alex P. (ed.) *Handbook of Terrorism Prevention and Preparedness*, The Hague, NL: ICCT Press, 2020, p.239. <https://icct.nl/app/uploads/2021/10/Chapter-9-Handbook.pdf>

55 Interview with a religious leader, Boulsa, Centre-Nord region, Burkina Faso.

56 Murphy, “Security Fragmentation Hinders Humanitarian Response in the Sahel,” November 2020, pp.5-6.

57 OCHA, “Burkina Faso, Mali, & Western Niger,” *Humanitarian Snapshot*, 29 November, 2021. <https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/en/operations/west-and-central-africa/infographic/burkina-faso-mali-and-niger-humanitarian-snapshot-0>

58 Interview with a state representative, Kaya, Centre-Nord region, Burkina Faso.

59 Interview with a religious leader, Boulsa, Centre-Nord region, Burkina Faso.

60 Interview with a traditional authority, Mané, Centre-Nord region, Burkina Faso.

61 Interview with a traditional authority, Kaya, Centre-Nord region, Burkina Faso.

62 Interview with a traditional authority, Kaya, Centre-Nord region, Burkina Faso.

63 Interview with a traditional authority, Gayeri, Est region, Burkina Faso.

own advantages.⁶⁴ Oscillating between a direct involvement and a role of mediator, VEOs have instrumentalised local conflicts in various ways.⁶⁵ They have notably been able to build upon longstanding tensions between Fulani and Daoussak pastoralist communities along the Mali-Niger border, as well as between Dogon sedentary farmers and Fulani herders clashing over the occupation of transhumance corridors and grazing areas, and the destruction of harvest by herds crossing cultivated lands in Central Mali.⁶⁶ In other instances, groups have managed to position themselves as conflict mediators arbitrating and settling local disputes, particularly over land.⁶⁷ The current displacement crisis, if it translates into an exacerbation of tensions over lands and resources, might well provide VEOs with additional opportunities to assert their control across the region.

Impact of responses to displacement and tensions around aid provision

Finally, support provided to displaced populations can also fuel resentment among host communities due to a (real or perceived) aid imbalance. While many organisations and implementing partners seem to pay great attention to these unintended side effects, and to reinforcing trust and social cohesion, notably by offering support to both displaced and host communities, this feeling of injustice and preferred treatment seems to remain, as highlighted by various interviewees. One interviewee noted,

There are also disagreements between displaced and indigenous host populations. These disagreements are also linked to the different interventions of humanitarian partners to help the displaced, especially in terms of food. The population feels that the humanitarian partners give too much importance to the displaced compared to them.⁶⁸

Another interviewee noted, “At the moment, we are faced with water and sanitation problems. The consequence is also that the hosts who received the displaced are abandoned. This risks creating another conflict that does not say its name.”⁶⁹ This potential conflict-driving factor may indeed reduce host populations’ willingness to look at displaced people with compassion. Some interviewees have indeed gone even further and accused displaced populations of enriching themselves based on this assistance, describing them as “very dishonest displaced people who want to get rich with the aid,”⁷⁰ while others established a link between “the movement of displaced people and the increase in theft and begging in the municipality.”⁷¹

64 International Crisis Group, “The Social Roots of Jihadist Violence in Burkina Faso’s North,” Africa Report no. 254, 12 October, 2017. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/burkina-faso/254-social-roots-jihadist-violence-burkina-fasos-north>

65 William Assanvo, Baba Danoko, Lori-Anne Thérroux-Bénoni, and Ibrahim Maïga, “Violent extremism, organised crime and local conflicts in Liptako-Gourma,” ISS West Africa Report 26, December 2019. <https://issafrica.s3.amazonaws.com/site/uploads/war-26-eng.pdf>

66 Ibid., p.19.

67 Ibid., p.20.

68 Interview with a community member, Abala, Tillabéri region, Niger.

69 Interview with a state representative, Kaya, Centre-Nord region, Burkina Faso.

70 Interview with a religious leader, Kaya, Centre-Nord region, Burkina Faso.

71 Interview with a community member, Sampelga, Sahel region, Burkina Faso. See also: Interview with a state representative, Sampelga, Sahel region, Burkina Faso: “Conflicts and insecurity in the villages have resulted in an increased number of displaced people in my municipality and all that follows such as theft and begging.”

In affected regions, some local formal and informal governance actors, including traditional and religious authorities, have also supported displaced people by “providing them with food, shelter and water to sustain themselves.”⁷² Efforts have notably focused on ensuring displaced people have some sort of housing, either finding places “where they can set up their tents or shelters,”⁷³ or working alongside aid organisations to provide shelter,⁷⁴ and ensuring children of displaced families are enrolled in school.⁷⁵ However, and while these community-level, traditional support mechanisms may facilitate the delivery of humanitarian assistance in remote rural areas, they might concurrently raise important challenges. More specifically, there is a reported risk to see help delivered being diverted by local authorities for their own benefits or those of their families, as well as a risk of depriving most marginalised segments of local communities from assistance. A large number of interviewees pointed to customary authorities favouring their close social circles at the expense of the broader community in the identification of aid beneficiaries:

As part of the involvement of the customary authorities in activities concerning their respective entities, partners give village chiefs the task of assisting agents in the identification of displaced persons, victims of a disaster, refugees, and others, in order to provide them with support, which may be in kind or in cash. It is in this task that village chiefs are most often found to favour their relatives, friends, and people they know.⁷⁶

Be they well-founded or not, these accusations of malpractice may undermine the legitimacy of traditional and religious authorities, which are often among the few local governance actors still present in conflict-affected areas. Building upon feelings of injustice and grievances against local elites and governance actors have also been at the core of some terrorist groups’ strategies.⁷⁷ Organisations like the Katiba Machina in Central Mali and Ansarul Islam in Burkina Faso have developed locally-tailored narratives that questions prevailing social orders and traditional norms, and denounces local authorities’ privileges, corrupt practices, and unequal treatment of the population in order to gain community-level support and recruit among the most disadvantaged segments of communities.⁷⁸

Conclusions and Recommendations

While displacement is used as a resilience mechanism in the face of rising insecurity, it hardly allows displaced populations to leave (extremist) violence behind. Rather, violence and attacks targeting refugee sites, as well as responses they might trigger from state security forces, can create resentment among host communities who may perceive the displaced as putting them in harm’s way and/or as being sympathetic – if not aligned with – terrorist organisations, thereby turning primary victims of terrorism into potential suspects, and resulting in further marginalisation

⁷² Interview with a religious authority, Kaya, Centre-Nord region, Burkina Faso.

⁷³ Interview with a traditional authority, Boulsa, Centre-Nord region, Burkina Faso.

⁷⁴ Interview with a traditional authority, Kaya, Centre-Nord region, Burkina Faso: “I have reserves of land that I have made available to NGOs to settle the displaced. [...] We have had to give space to NGOs to install tents serving as classrooms to allow the children of the displaced to continue their studies.”

⁷⁵ Interview with a traditional authority, Kongoussi, Centre-Nord region, Burkina Faso: “In the field of education, for example, many children of IDPs have been enrolled in school thanks to our intervention. In addition, they have been given land for housing. We also ensure that they have water, food, and so on, so that they can meet their needs.”

⁷⁶ Interview with a community member, Abala, Tillabéri region, Niger.

⁷⁷ Demuyneck Méryl, and Julie Coleman, “Customary Leaders and Terrorism in the Sahel: Co-opted, Coerced, or Killed?” ICCT Perspective, 6 April 2022. <https://icct.nl/publication/customary-leaders-and-terrorism-in-the-sahel-co-opted-coerced-or-killed/>

⁷⁸ Ibid.

of the displaced people. Moreover, protracted situations of displacement, where populations are placed in dire conditions within under-resourced camps or communities for long periods of time, has the potential to feed resentment among both disenfranchised displaced people and host communities, which can perceive “the long-term presence of allogeous groups as a threat to their own security and livelihoods.”⁷⁹ Particularly, the increased pressure exerted on already scarce and often disputed lands and natural resources represents a major challenge that may negatively impact intercommunal relations.

Overall, this paper underlined that mass displacement resulting from rising insecurity and terrorist violence has the potential to further fuel local conflicts, which are known to be exploited by violent extremist groups to recruit, implant and expand their control throughout the Sahel. In addition to being a major source of humanitarian concerns, responding to the displacement crisis in the Sahel thus appears as “essential for sustainable peace.”⁸⁰ However, responses themselves, if not adequately planned and conducted, may also contribute to creating grievances among host communities, that may be perceived to be unfairly treated and excluded from aid and support provided to displaced persons. The following seven recommendations provide insights on further steps that may be taken by national governments and external partners to find durable solutions for populations currently displaced and prevent further displacement.

1. Guarantee affected communities a voice

Responding efficiently to the crisis first and foremost requires understanding it.⁸¹ Ensuring access to affected communities, including by the media or researchers, where appropriate, is therefore crucial, as “poorly understood dynamics, the lack of data, and an increasingly repressive media environment narrows opportunities for nuanced government policies and reduces potential for humanitarian actors to explain their actions.”⁸²

2. Ensure affected communities’ protection and security

In addition to avoiding further casualties, improving security to better prevent attacks against and around displaced populations’ sites would also help prevent grievances from growing among local communities, who may otherwise perceive the forcibly displaced as putting them in harm’s way. Threats faced by displaced people extend beyond those from VEOs alone. Governments must also address violence and abuses being reportedly committed by CT forces, as continued impunity is likely to create further grievances against state forces and authorities, and push more individuals into the ranks of violent groups.

3. Implement do-no-harm interventions for displaced and non-displaced communities

In a context where VEOs have demonstrated their capacity to instrumentalise local grievances to their own benefits, it is essential to ensure that interventions “address social cohesion and apply a conflict sensitive approach [...] to avoid disrupting the social fabric.”⁸³ This can only be achieved if support and assistance are not only targeted at IDPs and refugees, disregarding the additional burden host families and communities, often already over stretched, take in supporting displaced

79 Chauzal, “Importing the Malian conflict to the Group of Five Sahel countries: The case of the Ayorou refugee camp in Niger,” 5 May, 2020.

80 Wilson Centre, “Building Resilience in the Sahel in an Era of Forced Displacement,” Event, 8 April, 2021. <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/event/building-resilience-sahel-era-forced-displacement>

81 Henry Wilkins, “Burkina Faso’s Thousands of Invisible IDPs Cut Off From Support,” VoA News, 20 June, 2021. https://www.voanews.com/a/episode_burkina-fasos-thousands-invisible-idps-cut-support-4722636/6117292.html

82 Murphy, “Security Fragmentation Hinders Humanitarian Response in the Sahel,” November 2020, p.8.

83 Ghaidaa Motahar, and Mohammed Al-Sabahi, “Tensions Among Local Yemeni Communities Due to Aid Imbalance,” Atlantic Council, July 12, 2017. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/tension-among-local-yemeni-communities-due-to-aid-imbalance/>

people. Involving local communities in developing and implementing support mechanisms is also essential to attenuate perceptions of imbalance in aid distribution.

Furthermore, some interventions specifically aimed at preventing tensions and/or resolving disputes between host and displaced communities are likely to be beneficial. Structures have, in some instances, been created to better organise community-level responses,⁸⁴ and prevent conflicts between displaced and host communities. For instance, consultation frameworks put in place in Niger Tillabéri region “to prevent conflicts between the two communities, favour the socio-economic integration of refugees, and promote peaceful cohabitation so that people can easily accept each other”⁸⁵ provide promising examples. Past projects conducted inside and outside the region also offer useful insights and lessons learned in this regard.⁸⁶ Finally, long-term support will be needed to ensure that, when the security situation allows, displaced populations continue to be supported upon their return to their areas of origins, with sustainable projects addressing structural challenges that communities of return might face.

4. Develop strategic communications to reduce stigmatisation of displaced populations

Developing adequate strategic communications with host communities may also help reduce perceptions that displaced persons are possibly extremists or have ulterior motives. Efforts might take the form of community sensitisation to help mitigate stigma and negative outcomes on IDPs and refugees, including socio-economic exclusion and marginalisation. Goals and objectives of assistance programmes should also be communicated to avoid creating the impression that the forcibly displaced are being given special treatment. Clearly delineating the roles and responsibilities of those involved in such interventions, including community-level actors, might moreover prevent issues related to (perceptions of) aid embezzlement and other malpractices. It might for instance include sharing information about customary authorities’ role in supporting the identification of aid beneficiaries and criteria used for selection.

5. Build (cautiously) upon community-level mechanisms and actors

Community-level and traditional support mechanisms in place in the Sahel can provide a useful basis upon which international partners may build. It should however be reminded that not only are these schemes insufficient to respond to the humanitarian catastrophe at play in the region, but they also present some important limits. Seeking the help of customary authorities should be done with caution, bearing in mind the risk of aid diversion and of depriving those of different ethnicities and most marginalised segments of local communities from assistance. Even in instances where aid embezzlement and other malpractices are not supported by evidence, tasking these authorities with identifying aid beneficiaries puts a significant burden, as they may subsequently be seen as the ones depriving part of the population from assistance.

84 Interview with a local civil servant, Sampelga, Sahel region, Burkina Faso: “Committees have been set up by the prefecture. These committees are responsible firstly for registering displaced persons, then for setting up a site to house them and finally for distributing food and necessities sent by the central government and NGOs to displaced persons.” See also an interview with a traditional authority, Kaya, Centre-Nord region, Burkina Faso: “In the neighbourhood here, we have set up a committee to receive IDPs. This committee is responsible for distributing food and other necessities that NGOs and government actors bring.”

85 Interview with a state representative, Abala, Tillabéri region, Niger.

86 See for instance: Maud Bakirdjian, “How to reduce tensions between host communities and refugees: Lessons learned from Niger,” D&ME for Peace, 30 November 2015. <https://www.dmeformpeace.org/resource/how-to-reduce-tensions-between-host-communities-and-refugees-lessons-learned-from-niger/>

6. Respond to and prevent further displacement through long-term development

National and international stakeholders should realise that, while forced displacement raises major challenges, it also presents opportunities for interventions whose outcomes may go beyond solely responding to the issue of displacement and could impact the broader Sahelian crisis. Too often seen solely in humanitarian terms, the displacement crisis requires “a holistic, longer term development response”⁸⁷ that simultaneously addresses some of the factors conducive to the spread of violent extremism. For instance, improving infrastructures and basic service provision in remote rural areas would not only allow local communities to absorb the increased pressure created by mass displacement, but would also help address the conditions allowing violent extremism to thrive and contribute to resolving the crisis over the longer-term.

7. Increase the understanding of the causes and effects of forced displacement

While this paper has provided an initial exploration of the links between mass displacement, local conflicts and violent extremism, further research documenting cases of attacks conducted against refugee and IDP sites, motivations behind these incidents and their overall impact on terrorist influence throughout the region, would be required to better understand violent extremist groups’ strategy toward displaced populations in the Sahel. Further research would moreover allow to increase the understanding of the broader effects of mass displacement, including on populations left behind in communities of origin and those who return to their places of origin after a period of displacement. Avenues for further research also include exploring age- and gender-specific dynamics, as well as the extent to which displaced populations, having been directly confronted to the damages caused by terrorism, may be well positioned to contribute to preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) throughout the region.⁸⁸

⁸⁷ World Bank, “Forced Displacement of and Potential Solutions for IDPs and Refugees in the Sahel: Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania & Niger,” August 2014. <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitstream/handle/10986/19975/899510WPOBox380splacement0study0WEB.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>

⁸⁸ Mbiyozo, Aimée-Noël, “Fleeing terror, fighting terror: The truth about refugees and violent extremism,” Institute for Security Studies, East Africa Report no. 17, January 2018. https://media.africaportal.org/documents/Fleeing_terror.pdf

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