The advance of the Hydra

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Over the last decade, the Sahel has consolidated its position as the global region with the highest concentration of terrorism-related fatalities. This reality is not a product of chance, but the direct consequence of structural socio-political weakness within its constituent countries. Successive coups d'état—which have mapped out a corridor of instability stretching from Guinea to Sudan—coupled with chronic inequality and extreme poverty, have created the perfect conditions for power vacuums. These sovereign strongholds, lacking the effective presence of state institutions, become highly coveted targets. The emergence of these enclave's results in the

expansion of terrorist groups which, attracted by the possibility of extending their influence across the region and the continent at large, advance territorially, increase domestic instability, and therefore creating a crippling conflict in the region.

It is imperative to understand that this phenomenon is no longer an exclusive crisis of the Sahelian hinterland; rather, it belongs to an established dynamic of conflict globalization. Within the framework of political violence and terrorism, insurgency tactics have demonstrated an adaptability and mobility among non-state armed groups and militias that allow them to spread to other countries in the region. In this context, Benin and Togo, two contiguous countries strategically located on the Gulf of Guinea, have begun to suffer the contagion of this jihadist expansion. What was initially perceived as a distant threat is today a frontier reality that jeopardizes the stability of one of the continent's most vital trade routes.

Southward expansion is not merely a response to ideological impulse, but to a logistical and financial necessity of insurgent groups—primarily the Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims (JNIM), linked to Al-Qaeda, alongside various factions of the Islamic State. Movement toward Benin and Togo has been facilitated by the physical geography of the north, dominated by the W, Arly, and Pendjari national park complexes. These vast territories, difficult to patrol, have been utilized as sanctuaries where combatants establish rear bases, supply routes, and training camps beyond the reach of government forces, leveraging geography to consolidate themselves as prevalent actors. In Benin, the situation has escalated from sporadic incursions to coordinated attacks utilizing Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs), evidencing a transfer of technology and tactics from the battlefields of Mali and Burkina Faso. For its part, Togo has seen its traditionally peaceful Savanes region become the epicentre of clashes that have forced the government in Lomé to declare states of emergency and deploy elite military units to the north. The contagion is not merely military; it is a silent infiltration that exploits porous borders drawn without regard for the ethnic and commercial realities of the area.

One of the most critical points facing current geopolitical analysis is the ability of jihadist groups to function as agents of alternative governance. In northern Benin and Togo, where the central state is often perceived as an extractive or simply non-existent entity, insurgent groups exploit pre-existing communal tensions. Disputes between sedentary farmers and nomadic herders, exacerbated by pressure on natural resources due to climate change, are utilized by terrorists to present themselves as mediators and providers of justice. In fact, as the United Nations Development Program declares in its 2023 "Journey to extremism in Africa: pathways to restore recruitment and disengagement" report, "forty percent of voluntary recruits joined a VE group within one month of their first encounter with the group and 67 percent joined within one year", which highlights the lack of protection and social services provided by the state.

Recruitment in these countries does not necessarily follow a pattern of deep religious radicalization in its initial phase; instead, it relies on economic opportunism. In communities where youth unemployment rates are alarming and future prospects are non-existent, the offer of a salary, a motorcycle, or simply a sense of belonging to a powerful group becomes an infallible recruitment tool. This "subsistence terrorism" is what makes the threat so difficult to eradicate through simple military action, as the insurgency camouflages itself within the local social fabric. Again, according to the UNDP, "among nearly 2,200 interviewees, one-quarter of voluntary recruits cited job opportunities as their primary reason for joining". In this same study, only 17% of the two thousand people interviewed had religion as their main motivation for joining these groups.

The situation in Benin and Togo is unfolding at a moment of retreat for traditional Western powers. Anti-French sentiment sweeping the Sahel has weakened security cooperation mechanisms such as Operation Barkhane and the G5 Sahel. This deterioration has been compounded by the wave of military coups in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, which has deepened the rift with Economic Community of West African States and led to sanctions and reduced cooperation, while the emergence of the Alliance of Sahel States signals a further fragmentation of regional security architecture. For Benin and Togo, this institutional divide limits access to coordinated regional support and weakens cross-border security guarantees at a time of increasing spillover from the Sahel. This has forced Gulf of Guinea states to seek new alliances within the "Accra Initiative," a regional cooperation effort aimed at preventing terrorism from reaching the sea. However, a lack of resources and mistrust between neighbours hinder an effective coordinated response.

Meanwhile, the vacuum left by the West is being observed with interest by new actors. Russia, through its private security services, and China, via strategic port infrastructure investments, offer cooperation models that do not demand the democratic reforms typically required by the European Union. This competition between powers adds a layer of geopolitical complexity: Benin and Togo must balance their urgent need for security against the risk of becoming pawns in a new Cold War over West African resources.

The future of Benin and Togo will depend on their ability to implement a "comprehensive security" strategy. If the response is limited to militarization, the risk of further alienating northern populations is high, which would fuel the insurgency cycle. Hypothetical forecasts point toward two divergent scenarios: The first one, a bit pessimistic, where terrorist groups could manage to consolidate stable corridors toward the south that would provide the chance for them to attacks on coastal urban centres and tourist hubs, targeting the economic heart of these nations. This would trigger a flight of foreign investment and a collapse of regional trade; the other, a bit more optimistic, where governments must manage to reinvest the north reclaiming legitimacy through the provision of basic services and the

integration of marginalized communities in order to erode the insurgency's support base. Should this hypothesis be successful, Benin and Togo could then function as the "containment wall" that saves the Gulf of Guinea from total instability.

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