



Working Paper: Policy Response Options for West Africa's Security and Democracy Crisis

Alex Vines and Romane Dideberg



NÔ CUDJI PAZ
OBSERVATÓRIO DA PAZ



Title: Working Paper: Policy Response Options for West Africa's Security and Democracy Crisis

Authors: Alex Vines and Romane Dideberg - Chatham House

Edition:

Instituto Marquês de Valle Flôr (IMVF)

Liga Guineense dos Direitos Humanos (LGDH)

Design and layout: Matrioska Design

Printing: Ondagrafe

Print run: 200 copies

October, 2024

ISBN: 978-989-35474-7-2

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This publication was published by the project “Observatório da Paz”, financed by the European Union and co-financed by Camões – Instituto da Cooperação e da Língua, I.P. and implemented by Instituto Marquês de Valle Flôr (IMVF) in partnership with the Liga Guineense dos Direitos Humanos (LGDH). The views expressed in this publication are those of the authors and should not be attributed to any other person or institution, namely the European Union and Camões, I.P.

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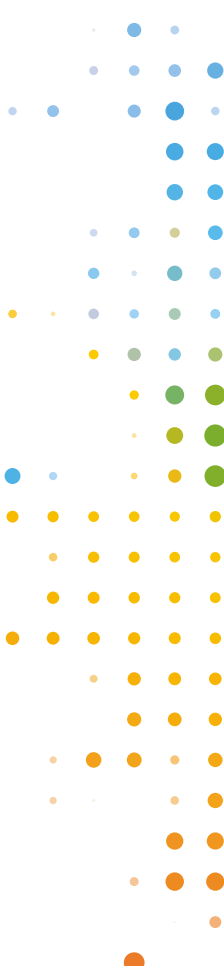


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INTRODUCTION

Insecurity has spread over most of the Sahel region of West Africa, particularly in the aftermath of the 2011 military intervention in Libya. The region was already grappling with fragility, compounded by a convergence of challenges including climate change, demographic shifts and governance failings that were hindering equitable development and economic growth. Today it has become the epicentre for coups and terrorism in Africa, with the emergence or re-emergence of community conflicts, insurgencies and the multiplication of militias, displacing about seven million people.

The international policy response has primarily centred around training local militaries. This has had the unintended consequence of newly trained forces exacerbating security challenges by becoming praetorian guards for ineffective elected civilian administrations. As security conditions continued to deteriorate, segments of the population lost all trust in their governments and fragile states have transitioned into brittle ones, with a level of popular support for military juntas assuming control through coups that is greater than Western observers would like to admit. These juntas have subsequently turned away from traditional partners such as the UN, EU, US and most notably France, and are actively forging new links with states the Mali junta has labelled 'Sincere Partners,' – China, Russia, Turkey and Iran - to consolidate their grip to power.

The most recent shock to the region came in January 2024, when the military juntas of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger announced their intention to leave the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and set up a rival Alliance of Sahel States (AES), accusing the regional bloc of being under the influence of foreign powers and a "threat" to the sovereignty of these three land-locked states. Yet, despite having blamed external actors - particularly France and ECOWAS - for all their shortcomings, the juntas have failed to improve livelihoods after distancing themselves from them, and there are signs of 'buyer's remorse' among civilians as they face continued insecurity under regimes that are themselves becoming increasingly authoritarian.¹

At the same time, Jihadist fighters are widening their reach, edging into western Mali, entering zones south of Niger's capital Niamey, and spilling across borders into the territory of West Africa's coastal states. Since 2022, there has been a 250 percent increase of violent events by militant Islamist groups within 50km of the borders of the coastal states neighbouring the Sahelian countries² and there is a possibility that Benin becomes the bridge between the Lake Chad Basin and the Sahelian crisis. The reports of a failed coup plot against President Tallon in September 2024 are a further reminder of coastal states' fragility.³

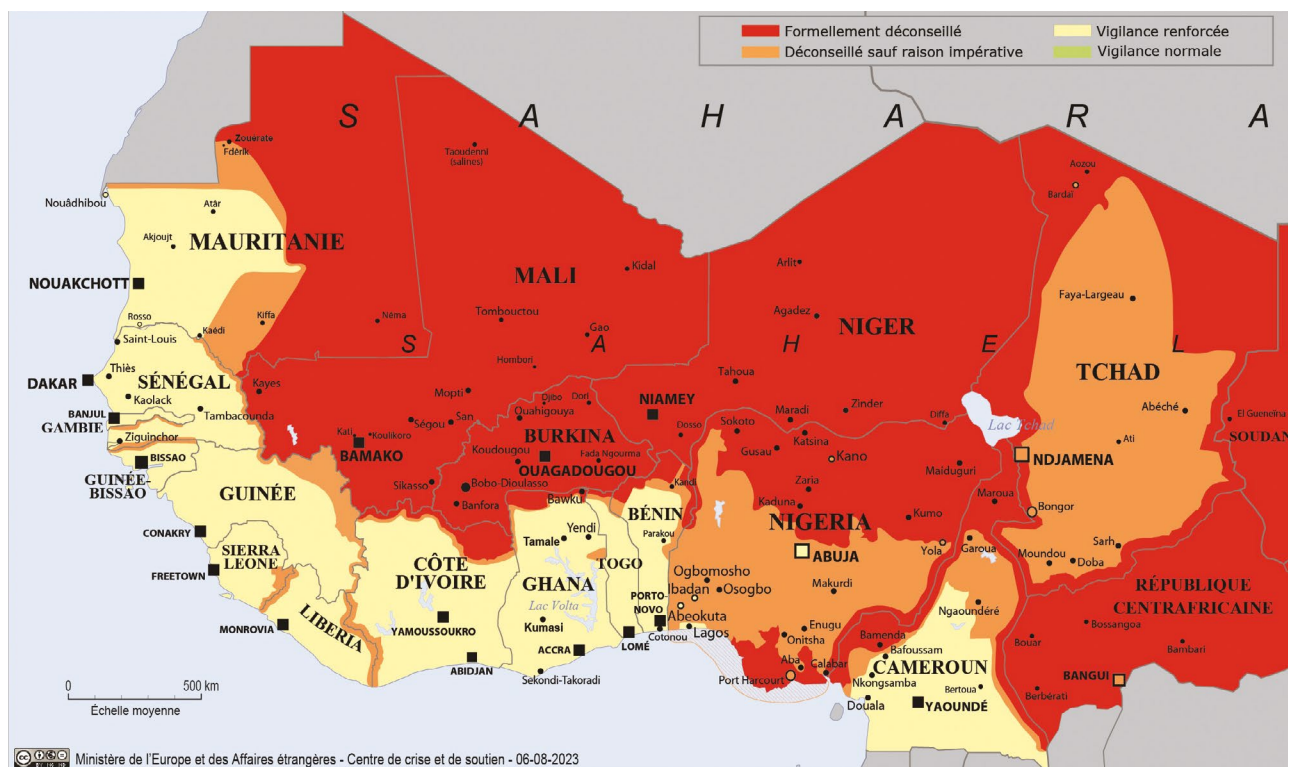
¹ Kanté, A. et al. (2024), *Repenser la gestion des changements anticonstitutionnels de gouvernement en Afrique de l'Ouest*, Report, Dakar: Institut d'Etudes de Sécurité, <https://issafrica.s3.amazonaws.com/uploads/pages/1720528840601-war-50-fr.pdf>

² Eizenga, D. and Gnanguenon, A. (2024), *Recalibrating Coastal West Africa's Response to Violent Extremism*, Briefing paper, Washington DC: Africa Center for Strategic Studies, <https://africacenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/ASB-43-FR-FINAL.pdf>

³ De Bruijne, K. (2024), 'The Jihadis are stalking Benin', African Arguments, 4 July 2024, <https://africanarguments.org/2024/07/the-jihadis-are-stalking-benin/>; Abatan, J. and Assanovo, W. (2023) *Links between violent extremism and illicit activities in Benin*, Report, Dakar: Institut d'Etudes de Sécurité. <https://issafrica.org/research/west-africa-report/links-between-violent-extremism-and-illicit-activities-in-benin>

This paper examines the two key regional trends - the proliferation of coups and the rise in terrorism. While Western and regional engagement and dialogue with these military juntas should continue, it is crucial that coup leaders are not rewarded with seat at international summits. History underscores the instability of military juntas in this region and their susceptibility to counter coups. Long-term stability in the region hinges on return to constitutional rule, and the establishment of administrations capable of delivering developmental improvements, resetting the social contract, and generating both external investment and trust among their citizens. Governance must move beyond protecting elite interests and relying heavily on foreign security actors. Instead, there should be a shift towards establishing a professional and accountable security and intelligence apparatus alongside a focus on human security. Development with security is the only effective strategy to combat violent extremism.

Map 1: French Government Risk Map for West Africa in 2023



Source: French Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs (2023), 'Situations au Niger, au Mali et au Burkina Faso', France Diplomatie, 7 August 2023.

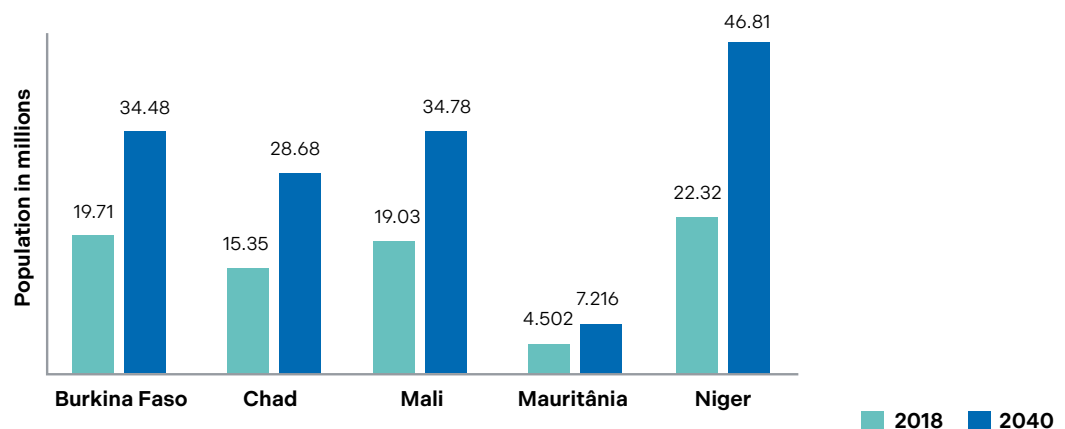
1. BACKGROUND

The Sahel region comprises eleven states, all of which are among the twenty least developed countries in the world, according to the Human Development Index. Climate change is altering socio-economic equilibria and security landscapes everywhere, but faster in West Africa than the global average. As of mid- 2024, the regional food monitoring system indicates that at least 49.5 million people across the region are grappling with chronic food shortages, leading to the displacement of millions more.⁴ These challenges have contributed to an emerging identity-driven conflict, particularly involving the Fulani – a diverse semi-nomadic community of 30 million people spread across West Africa – that are being viewed increasingly as a security risk by regional coastal governments, Ghana and Sierra Leone included. Population growth and desertification have compelled Fulani nomads to move southward in search of more fertile lands to graze their herds, triggering conflicts with settled farming communities. The Fulanis have been stigmatised and targeted by West African governments, which in turn pushed more Fulanis to join the jihadists.⁵

West Africa also has the fastest growing and youngest populations in the world. By 2030, 40 percent of the population in the Sahel are expected to live in urban areas.⁶ By approximately 2020, the regional population had already surpassed 400 million, with projections indicating that it will exceed 500 million between 2030 and 2035. In 2023, Niger had the lowest median age globally, standing at just 15.1 years. However, alongside this youthful demographic, the region also faces challenges related to low life expectancy. In 2023, life expectancy in West Africa stood at 57 years for males and 59 years for females.⁷

The Sahel is one of the regions with the highest renewable energy potential in the world, especially solar production capacity, but currently about half of the 362 million people living in the Sahelian region do not have access to electricity. Much of this solar capacity will only be harnessed with improved security.

Graph 1: Regional Demographics 2040 Projection



Source: Maiga, I. Cilliers, J. Welborn, L. and Kwasi, S. (2020), 'The G5 Sahel Region: a Desert Flower?' Institute for Security Studies

⁴ Africa Confidential (2024), 'The Juntas are running out of Excuses vol.65, no.10', 10 May 2024, https://www.africa-confidential.com/article-preview/id/14967/The_juntas_are_running_out_of_excuses

⁵ Cissé, M. G. (2020), *Understanding Fulani Perspectives on the Sahel Crisis*, Spotlight, Dakar: Africa Center for Strategic Studies, <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/understanding-fulani-perspectives-sahel-crisis/>

⁶ International Energy Agency (2022), *Clean Energy Transitions in the Sahel*, Report, Paris: <https://www.iea.org/reports/clean-energy-transitions-in-the-sahel>

⁷ Statista (2024), 'African countries with the lowest median age as of 2023, by country' <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1121264/median-age-in-africa-by-county/>

Despite this, the region is expecting economic growth, with estimates increasing from 3.2 percent in 2023 to 4 percent in 2024 and 4.4 percent in 2025. These figures are aided in 2024 by hydrocarbon production and exports coming on stream. Strong economic performance is anticipated for Niger (with growth projected to rise from an estimated 4.3 percent in 2023 to 11.2 percent in 2024), Senegal (with growth projected to rise from an estimated 4.1 percent in 2023 to 8.2 percent in 2024) and Mauritania. Nigeria and Ghana also have significant oil production.

Mining in West Africa is also significant, especially bauxite, gold, iron ore, uranium, and diamonds, destined for global supply chains. Guinea, for example, has the world's largest bauxite reserves, having accounted for half of global production of aluminium ore exports in 2020. Similarly, Ghana was the second largest producer of bauxite in 2022. Guinea and Mauritania are also two of the largest Iron Ore producers in the world and Niger is a world class uranium producer.⁸ Lithium has also become of increasing interest with an operational mine in Mali and shortly in Ghana and prospecting in Côte d'Ivoire.⁹ In 2011, West Africa became the hub of African gold mining when the region's total production of gold overtook that of South Africa. While gold mine production has been declining throughout the world, West African production has been growing.¹⁰

However, in many instances these extractive industries have become enclave economies providing very localised security and rents to political elites that do not redistribute them for developmental and pro-poor purposes. There is also a trend of resource nationalism emerging in the region, with the juntas in the Sahel seeking to renegotiate mining contracts and even seeking nationalisation. And even if this headline growth were to be delivered and distributed, it would still fall short of keeping up with the region's demographic projections.¹¹ With up to 80 percent of its population already living on less than US\$2 a day, and 7 million people internally displaced in ECOWAS due to insecurity and climate shocks, poverty is more widespread in the region than in any other part of Africa – and is only likely to become more pervasive.¹²

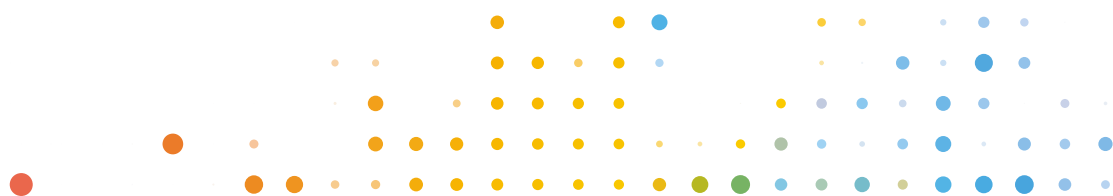
⁸ Reuters (2023), 'Niger is among the world's biggest uranium producers', 31 July 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/markets/commodities/uranium-mines-niger-worlds-7th-biggest-producer-2023-07-28/>

⁹ Ng, E. (2024), 'China's Ganfeng Lithium seals US\$343 million mine deal in West Africa, gains control of one of the world's largest sources,' South China Morning Post, 8 May 2024, <https://www.scmp.com/business/article/3261863/chinas-ganfeng-lithium-seals-us343-million-mine-deal-west-africa-gains-control-one-worlds-largest>

¹⁰ McKay, D. (2024), 'West Africa's gold miners are having a major moment,' MiningMX, 3 May 2024, <https://www.miningmx.com/news/gold/56740-west-africas-gold-small-caps-are-having-a-major-moment/>

¹¹ African Development Bank (2024), West Africa, *Macroeconomic Performance and Outlook in 2024*, Report, Abidjan: <https://www.afdb.org/en/documents-publications-africas-macro-economic-performance-and-outlook/west-africa>

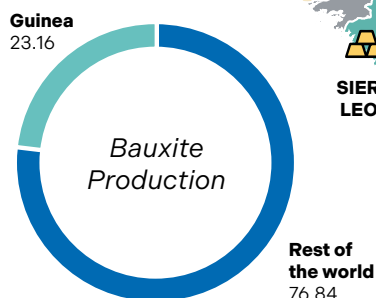
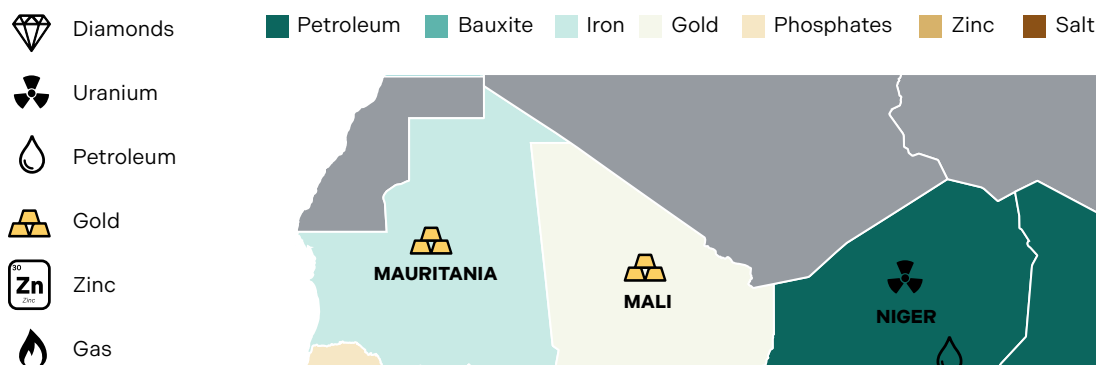
¹² People's Democratic Republic of Algeria Ministry of Foreign Affairs and National Community Abroad (2023), 'Conference of the Minister Attaf at Chatham House on the Sahel', Speech, Ahmed Attaf, Chatham House, 15 November 2023, <https://www.mfa.gov.dz/press-and-information/video-news/conference-of-the-minister-attaf-at-chatham-house-on-the-sahel>



Map 2: West Africa Minerals

Natural resources in West Africa *

Most abundant resource per country



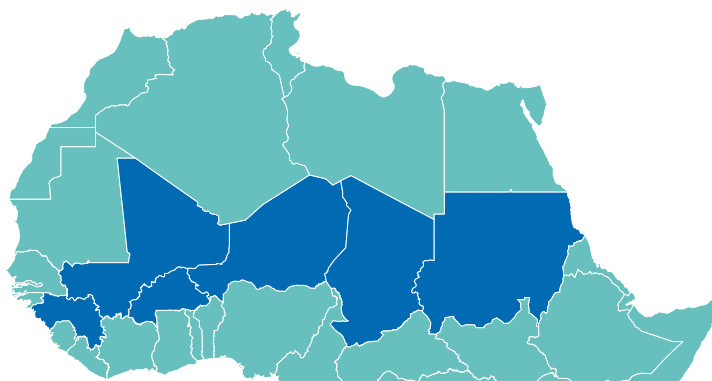
* Oil and Gas production in Senegal and Mauritania not yet taken into account (starting 2024)

Source: World Mining Data 2023, Volume 38, International Organizing Committee for the World Mining Congresses

'Arc of Instability'

Despite its economic potential, the Sahel accounts for more armed conflicts and crisis than any other region in the world. It is correct to state that the region hosts an arc of instability or coup belt, that stretches from the Atlantic Ocean to the Red Sea, with armed conflicts and multidimensional crises that continue to impact Sudan, Chad, Libya, Niger, Burkina Faso, Guinea, Mali, and Western Sahara. It is also the global epicentre of terrorism. **In 2022, the Sahel alone registered more than 43 percent of global terrorism deaths, while in 2007 (15 years previously), it was less than one percent.**¹³

Map 3: Arc of Instability or 'Coup Belt'



Guinea: September 2022
Mali: May 2021, August 2020
Burkina Faso: January, September 2022
Niger: July 2023
Chad: April 2021
Sudan: October 2021

Source: Chatham House Africa Programme

¹³ People's Democratic Republic of Algeria Ministry of Foreign Affairs and National Community Abroad (2023), 'Conference of the Minister Attaf at Chatham House on the Sahel', Speech, Ahmed Attaf, Chatham House, 15 November 2023, <https://www.mfa.gov.dz/press-and-information/video-news/conference-of-the-minister-attaf-at-chatham-house-on-the-sahel>

Box 1: ECOWAS and UEMOA

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) was established in Lagos, Nigeria in May 1975 and had a revised version of its treaty adopted and signed in July 1993 in Benin. It is headquartered in Nigeria's capital, Abuja, and was established to create a significant trade bloc among member states, promoting collective unity, self-sufficiency and enhancing economic cooperation.¹⁴

Currently the regional organization consists of 15 countries, Benin, Burkina Faso, Cabo Verde, Côte d'Ivoire, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, and Togo. The last withdrawal from ECOWAS was in 2000 when Mauritania left to join the Arab Maghreb Union, although it recently signalled its desire to rejoin. Morocco has also sought membership.

There is a significant variability of politics across this region. Among them, eight speak French, five speak English and the remaining two speak Portuguese. ECOWAS has been the leading political authority in the region, collaborating with members to address challenges in politics, economy, and security, but the recent announcement of the military juntas in Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso that they wish to withdraw from the bloc have raised questions about the community's future.

Every ECOWAS member has the right to leave but any member wishing to withdraw must formally notify the ECOWAS executive secretariat and other member states and wait a year before withdrawing, during which time it is obliged to fulfil its ECOWAS agreement obligations.

The departing country loses a common passport, that enables visa-free travel among member countries, and duty-free trade rights. If the juntas in Burkina, Mali and Niger pull out of ECOWAS, millions of their expatriate nationals living in the bloc's coastal states could lose the rights they enjoyed under the ECOWAS free movement protocol. Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger will introduce new biometric passports as part of their withdrawal from the West African bloc in favour of a new Sahel alliance, Mali's leader announced in September 2024, on the first anniversary of the AES - a signal that these juntas are still considering breaking from the regional bloc. There is still a chance that all three states could also remain in ECOWAS, but this would depend on the compromises that the regional bloc would accept.

In contrast, UEMOA (West African Economic and Monetary Union), includes Benin, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea-Bissau, Mali, Niger, Senegal and Togo. Its members also enjoy freedom of movement among themselves, and UEMOA manages the West Africa franc which is the legal tender for its members. Mali has indicated it wishes to remain in UEMOA and Burkina Faso, having initially signalled an interest in leaving, may have begun to appreciate how economically disruptive this could be.

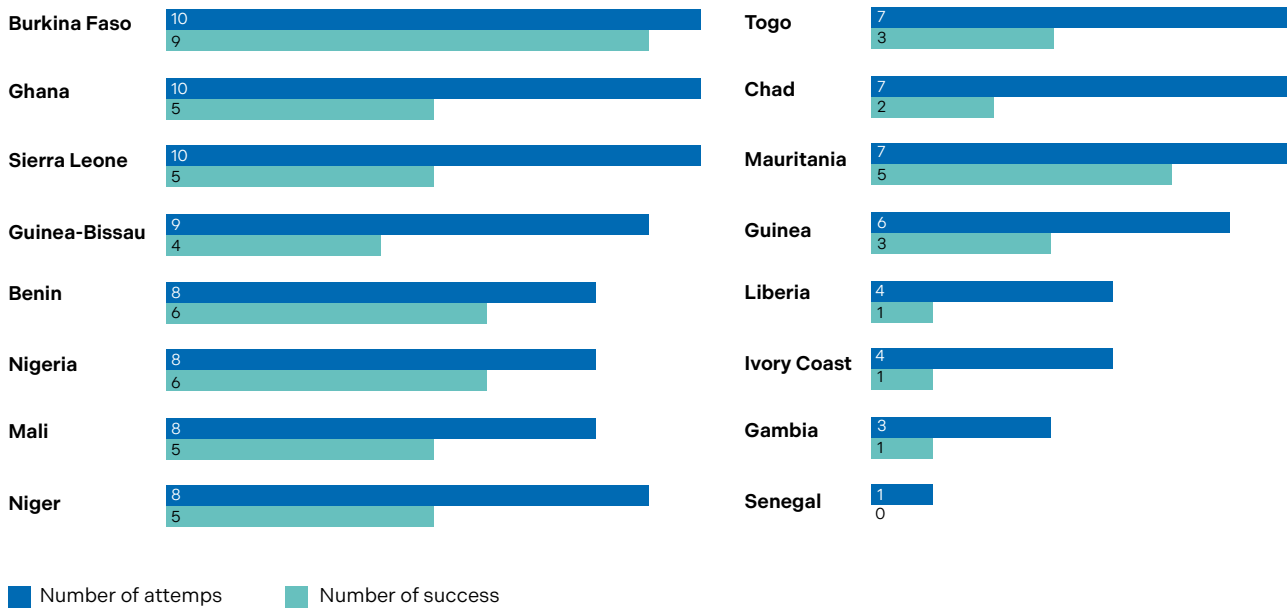
¹⁴ ECOWAS, (2024), 'Fundamental principles', <https://www.ecowas.int/fundamental-principles-2/>

2. COUP EPICENTRE

There was an average of four military coup attempts a year in Africa between 1960 and 2000. From 2000 to 2017 this declined to less than half but has risen again since 2020. The current tally is nine successful military coups since 2020, alongside at least the same number of failed attempts, largely in Francophone states and centred on what commentators have termed a Sahelian 'coup belt'.¹⁵ Since 2020, successful coups have taken place in Burkina Faso, Chad, Guinea, Mali (twice), and Niger. Additionally, there have been coup attempts in Benin, Burkina Faso, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Niger, Sierra Leone, and possibly in The Gambia and São Tomé and Príncipe. This has exacerbated political instability and sharpened focus on the fragility of constitutional rule in West Africa.

This wave of coups has been driven by multiple factors. African states were already suffering from the impacts of COVID-19 and a slow post-pandemic recovery, climate change shocks, increased food insecurity, political instability, weak global growth, and high-interest rates. All coup-affected states in West Africa are also noted for weak institutions and are also classified as Least Developed Countries (LDCs). But despite these commonalities, Africa's recent coups have taken a range of different forms.¹⁶

Graph 2: Coup attempts in West Africa since independence per country

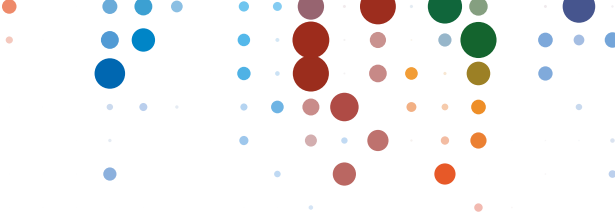


Source: Peyton, B. Bajjalieh, J. Shalmon, D. Martin, M. Bonaguro, J. (2020), 'Cline Center Coup D'état Project Dataset', University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

¹⁵ Aina, F. (2024), 'French mistakes helped create Africa's coup belt,' Aljazeera, 17 August, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2023/8/17/french-mistakes-helped-create-africas-coup-belt>

¹⁶ Vines, A. (2024), 'Understanding Africa's Coups,' E-publication ahead of print, Washington DC: Georgetown Journal of International Affairs, 13 April 2024, <https://gjia.georgetown.edu/2024/04/13/understanding-africas-coups/>

¹⁷ Aljazeera (2022), 'Burkina Faso's coup and political situation: All you need to know,' 5 October 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/10/5/coup-in-burkina-faso-what-you-need-to-know>



Insecurity Coups

Concerns over insecurity has been a key driver of coups in some countries. In Burkina Faso, a putsch brought Paul-Henri Sandaogo Damiba¹⁷ to power in January 2022, but his inability to deal with the country's Islamist insurgency led to his replacement by Captain Ibrahim Traoré in September of the same year. A further coup attempt against Burkina Faso's military rulers was thwarted in September 2023 by the country's intelligence and security services.

Mali has also experienced two military takeovers in the space of nine months. In August 2020, President Keita was removed from power by a group of military officers led by Colonel Assimi Goïta, the Head of the self-proclaimed National Committee for the Salvation of the People (CNSP), with retired military officer Bah N'daw installed as President. A second coup followed in May 2021 that replaced N'daw with Goïta himself.¹⁸

Anti-Autocratic Coups

The September 2021 removal of Guinea's President Alpha Conde by Special Forces commander Mamady Doumbouya was a response to Conde's abolition of presidential term limits and could be considered an example of an anti-autocratic coup.¹⁹ Doumbouya had initially proposed a three-year transition, but under pressure from ECOWAS, announced in October 2022 that this would be shortened to 24 months and include constitutional and electoral reform. A coup attempt in late 2023 followed by a government reshuffle is a reminder of the fragility of this regime.

A failed coup in November 2023 in Sierra Leone²⁰ also followed a disputed election, and long-standing leaders such as those in Cameroon, Equatorial Guinea and Togo may become increasingly vulnerable to such dynamics over time.

Constitutional Coups

Constitutional coups can be regarded as a bid by incumbents to undermine or alter a state's legal framework to remain in power. There have been two recent examples: Chad and Tunisia. Following a period of political and economic instability, Tunisian President Kais Saied dissolved the democratically elected parliament in July 2021 and has since seized more powers, changing the country's constitution in the process, assisted by the armed forces.²¹

In December 2023, Chadians voted in a referendum to approve a new constitution, expected to pave the way for Transitional President Mahamat Déby to run in the May 2024 national elections. Deby, who took over upon the battlefield death of his father in April 2021, had promised to return to democracy within 18 months, but in 2022 extended this period by two years. The African Union's (AU) Peace and Security Commission endorsed Chad's transitional framework.²²

¹⁸ Jezequel, J. H. (2021), 'Mali, a Coup within a Coup', *International Crisis Group*, 27 May 2021, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/sahel/mali/mali-un-coup-dans-le-coup>

¹⁹ Devermont, J. (2021), 'Guinea: The Causes and Consequences of West Africa's Latest Coup,' Washington DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/guinea-causes-and-consequences-west-africas-latest-coup>

²⁰ Mammoné, C. (2023), 'Sierra Leone's attempted coup and a cost of living crisis put peace to the test,' *The Conversation*, 12 December 2023, <https://theconversation.com/sierra-leones-attempted-coup-and-a-cost-of-living-crisis-put-peace-to-the-test-219047>

²¹ Yerkes, S. and Alhomoud, M. (2022), *One Year Later, Tunisia's President Has Reversed Nearly a Decade of Democratic Gains*, Commentary, Washington DC: Carnegie, 22 July 2022, <https://carnegieendowment.org/posts/2022/07/one-year-later-tunisias-president-has-reversed-nearly-a-decade-of-democratic-gains?lang=en>

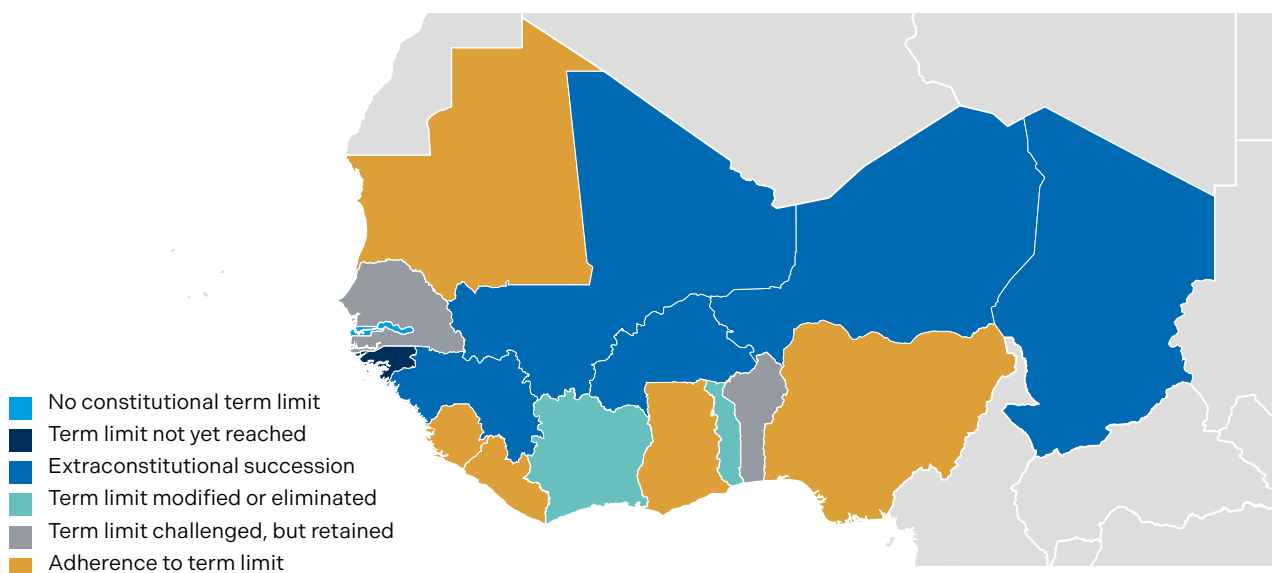
²² Institute for Security Studies (2021), *The PSC and Chad – policy implications of a historic decision*, Peace and Security Council Report, Dakar: Institute for Security Studies, 23 June 2021, <https://issafrica.org/pscreport/psc-insights/the-psc-and-chad-policy-implications-of-a-historic-decision>

Chad's state election body declared on 9 May 2024 that interim president Mahamat Idriss Déby had won the 6 May presidential election outright with over 60 percent of the vote, citing provisional results, even as his main challenger declared himself the winner.²³ What is sure, is that Déby's domestic credibility is weak and there continues to be widespread rumours of an impending coup. Having said that, despite the regime's fragility, the strategic importance of Chad has steeply increased over the last year especially for the West's 'stabilisation efforts', that have had to be terminated in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger. The EU and US are seeking to maintain cordial relations with President Déby. France maintains military facilities there and the US retains a small 25 strong military footprint (reduced significantly from 100 before the May elections at Chadian request).²⁴ President Déby appears not to wish to fully rupture these partnerships but is also seeking deepened engagement with Russia and China and has a close relationship with UAE.

Togo's divisive parliamentary and regional elections of 29 April 2024 that the ruling Union for the Republic (UNIR) Party overwhelmingly won, paves the way for President Faure Gnassingbe to extend his 19-year-old rule (whose mandate was due to expire in 2025). Some observers have called this a 'constitutional and electoral coup'. These elections followed hurriedly passed constitutional changes and two postponements of the elections. Following the changes the number of parliamentarians was increased to 113, who are now to elect a largely ceremonial president for a five-year mandate. The MPs from the majority party in parliament will also elect the Prime Minister/President of the Council of Ministers with executive powers, who will serve six years.²⁵

These changes occurred despite it being contrary to Article 2(1), Section II of the 2001 ECOWAS Supplementary Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance. Prior to the elections, ECOWAS sent a pre-election fact-finding mission to Togo but did then send an observation team which issued a timid joint statement with the African Union and La Francophonie calling the vote 'inclusive.'

Map 4: Constitutional term limits in West Africa



Source: Graphic adapted from Africa Center for Strategic Studies (2023), 'Term limit evasions and coups in Africa: Two Sides of the Same Coin' and United Nations Development Programme (2023), 'Soldiers and Citizens: Military Coups and the need for Democratic Renewal in Africa'.

²³ France 24 (2024), 'Chad election runner-up Succes Masra files bid to annul presidential poll result', 13 May 2024, <https://www.france24.com/en/africa/20240513-chad-election-runner-up-succes-masra-files-bid-to-annul-presidential-poll-result>

²⁴ Robertson, N. (2024), 'US quietly reopens talks with Chad amid challenges in Africa posture', Defence News, 27 August 2024, <https://www.defensenews.com/pentagon/2024/08/27/us-quietly-reopens-talks-with-chad-amid-challenges-in-africa-posture/>

²⁵ France 24 (2024), 'Togo's ruling party wins legislative vote in power-extending boost for Gnassingbe', 5 May 2024, <https://www.france24.com/en/africa/20240505-togo-ruling-party-wins-big-parliamentary-majority-in-boost-for-gnassingbe>

Palace Coups

In July 2023, Nigerien Presidential Guard Commander General Tchiani detained President Bazoum. It was the ninth in a series of coups and attempted coups in the country. Though he claimed to be motivated by the “continuing degradation of the security situation and poor economic and social governance”, the security situation in Niger was improving – unlike in Burkina Faso and Mali – and it appears that the real reason for the coup was Tchiani’s fears of being replaced. ECOWAS did not follow through on threats of military intervention to restore constitutional rule and has since focused on negotiating a transition plan.²⁶

In Guinea-Bissau there have been at least 10 coups or attempted coups since independence from Portugal in 1974 and only one democratically elected president has completed a full term in office. The current incumbent, President Embaló, was elected to a five-year term in December 2019, and has survived two attempted coups to overthrow him in February 2022 and late 2023. Embaló subsequently ordered the dissolution of the country’s legislature, and initially said he would not stand for a second term but has subsequently signalled that he was reconsidering this.²⁷

Putschist Playbook

Despite the difference in circumstances and motivations for coups, an increasingly familiar ‘putschist playbook’ seems to be emerging that holds across a majority of cases.

First, coup leaders claim a grassroots mandate for their actions, citing concerns over accountability or the defence of sovereignty against neo-colonial interference. Whether real or claimed, putschists then attempt to leverage this popular support to negotiate ever longer transition periods. ECOWAS was able to agree a twelve-month transition in Niger in 2010, but post-coup arrangements in the Sahel currently average three years – suggesting that putschists have an increasing appetite to hold on to the spoils of state power. Burkina Faso and Mali were supposed to hold elections in 2024 to transition out of military rule, but in April 2024 Mali banned all political and most press activity, and on 1 May, Mali junta leader Colonel Goïta announced that holding elections and returning to constitutional rule was ‘not a priority’, though he has not completely ruled it out. In May 2024, Burkina Faso’s junta announced it will extend its rule for another five years. The country’s ruler, Captain Ibrahim Traoré, will also be able to contest the next presidential election, the state-owned broadcaster announced.²⁸

The blueprint is clear: stage a coup, promise a transition but extend it as long as possible, and eventually hold elections – with coup leaders themselves as candidates, enjoying the advantage of incumbency, as occurred in Chad in May 2024.

²⁶ International Institute for Security Studies (2023), *The coup in Niger*, Comment vol.29, no.21, London: International Institute for Security Studies, <https://www.iiss.org/en/publications/strategic-comments/2023/the-coup-in-niger/>

²⁷ France 24 (2023), ‘Guinea-Bissau’s president dissolves parliament after ‘attempted coup’, 4 December 2023, <https://www.france24.com/en/africa/20231204-guinea-bissau-s-president-dissolves-parliament-after-attempted-coup>

²⁸ Nunoo, F. (2024), ‘Burkina Faso extends military rule by five years,’ BBC News, 26 May 2024, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c5117d8kz16o>

Consistency in Dealing with Putschists

The key policy challenge is therefore to ensure a focused transition timetable that avoids rewarding junta leaders in the long-term. This has not been helped by the weakening of anti-coup norms. There was an average of four coup attempts in Africa between 1960 and 2000. The 2000 Lomé Declaration, which mandated immediate suspension from the Organisation of African Unity (OAU), now AU, for illegal seizures of power, saw a significant decline in coup numbers.²⁹ The AU however failed to apply this sanction following coups in Zimbabwe (2017) and Sudan (2019), and again following Chad's unconstitutional transition in 2022.

Inconsistent responses by the wider international community have further eroded anti-coup norms. For example, the first coup in Mali in August 2020 attracted condemnation in principle but strategic openness by Western actors to continue to engage with the junta. The second Mali coup in May 2021, saw a more radicalised junta turning against western partners and deepening ties with Russia – resulting in the suspension of much of the West's engagement.³⁰ A similar pattern was seen in Burkina Faso, when France followed the first coup in January 2022 with an offer to expand its direct extrabudgetary support as well increase its military assistance through the provision of second-hand equipment from the French army, contrary to other Western states. However, a second coup on 28 September 2022 ended this engagement.³¹

As noted above, ECOWAS was not able to marshal a regional consensus for military action in Niger – and has since been weakened further by the shock of the threatened withdrawal of Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso in January 2024. **Strategic interests have seen the US forge strained but pragmatic relations with the new military government in Niger and the EU has also been divided on how to respond, with Italy and Spain advocating for continued engagement due to concerns over migration, in contrast to France which wanted a harder line.**

Four coup states were suspended by the AU in 2022 – Mali, Guinea, Burkina Faso and Sudan – and were not invited to the second US-Africa Leader's summit that December. But the following year saw them welcomed at both the maiden Saudi Arabia-Africa summit and the second Russia-Africa summit. Africa's juntas were also represented at the ninth Forum on China-Africa Cooperation in September 2024. China's President Xi Jinping met at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing with Malian Interim President Colonel Assimi Goïta on 2 September and announced the elevation of the China-Mali relationship to a strategic partnership.³²

Lessons Learned

A 2023 UNDP report titled *Soldiers and Citizens: Military Coups and the Need for Democratic Renewal in Africa*,³³ presented the findings of a vast perceptions survey which consulted 5,000 African citizens who lived through coups in Burkina Faso, Chad, Guinea, Mali and Sudan. It had three key insights.

²⁹ African Union, 'Accra Declaration on unconstitutional changes of government in Africa,' Accra, Ghana, (Last Updated 25 April 2022), <https://www.peaceau.org/en/article/declaration-on-unconstitutional-changes-of-government-in-africa>

³⁰ Schimmel, F. et al. (2024), *Stabilization Policies After the Sahel Coups: Comparison of the Policies of Germany, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands and the United States*, Report, Berlin: German Council on Foreign Relations. <https://dgap.org/en/research/publications/stabilization-policies-after-sahel-coups>

³¹ Watling, J. and Wilén, N. (2024), 'Assessing the Causes of Strategic Realignment in Sahelian States,' *Rusi Journal*, 169(4), pp. 64-77, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/03071847.2024.2395563?src=#d1e127>

³² China News (2024), 'Xi Jinping Meets with Malian President Colonel Assimi Goïta', 2 September 2024, http://newyork.china-consulate.gov.cn/eng/xw/202409/t20240902_11483337.htm

³³ United Nations Development Programme (2023), *Soldiers and Citizens: UNDP report highlights call for democratic renewal across Africa*, Report, Addis Ababa: UNDP <https://www.undp.org/africa/press-releases/soldiers-and-citizens-undp-report-highlights-call-democratic-renewal-across-africa>

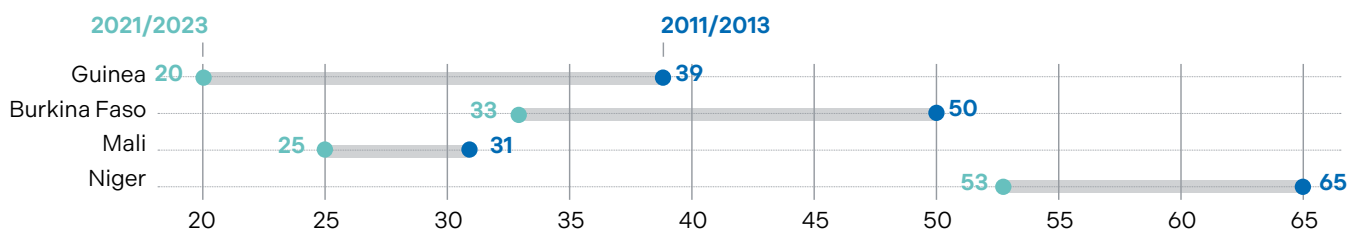
The first is a preference for democracy and a desire to see a reset of the social contract. **Citizens are clearly experiencing ‘buyer’s remorse’, with the putschists they initially welcomed unable to deliver on promised security, development, and investment, and actually perpetrating violence against civilians, especially in Mali³⁴ and Burkina Faso³⁵.** The second is that development is essential to mitigate coup risk. Consistent human security in fragile and insecure regions is vital. The newly launched Africa Facility to Support Inclusive Transitions (AFSIT), supported by the UNDP and the African Union Commission, could contribute to resolving gaps in current international and regional responses.

The most recent Afrobarometer reveals the growing dissatisfaction with the way democracy is working among citizens in Guinea, Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger (see graphic 3 below).

Graphic 3: Sharp decrease in satisfaction with democracy

Satisfaction with democracy

Percentage of respondents who say they are ‘fairly satisfied’ or ‘very satisfied’ with the way democracy is working in their country in 2011/2013 and in 2021/2023.



Source: Afrobarometer (2024), African insights 2024: Democracy at risk – the people’s perspective.

The third key finding shows that countries with a history of military involvement in political life are far more likely to experience a recurring pattern of coups. Despite nascent attempts by the military rulers of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger to shore up their rule, for instance, through the creation of the AES as an architecture of collective defence and mutual assistance and threatening to withdraw from ECOWAS to discourage regional pressure, there is a high risk that their tenure will end like those of their predecessors.

The 2024 Afrobarometer also shows that over the last 10 years, citizens in coup countries have become accustomed to military involvement in politics (see graphic 4 below). This acceptance makes another coup more likely in response to growing frustration with the incumbent putschists’ shortcomings.

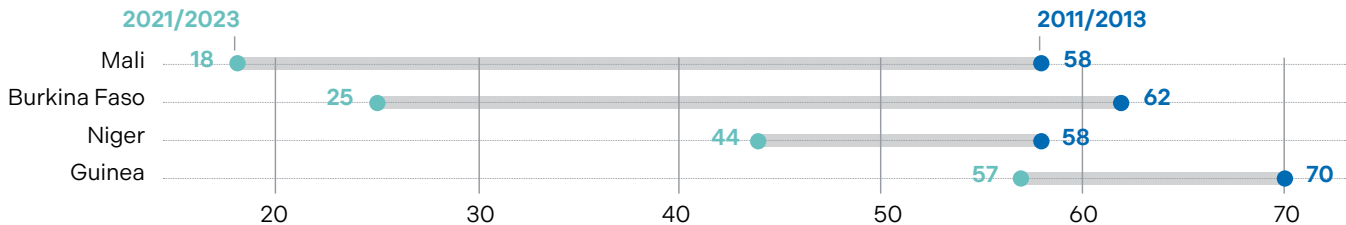
³⁴ Human Rights Watch (2024), ‘Mali: Army, Wagner Group Atrocities Against Civilians Investigations Needed Into Indiscriminate Drone Strikes, Summary Killings’ [https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/03/28/mali-army-wagner-group-atrocities-against-civilians#:~:text=\(Nairobi\)%20%E2%80%93%20Malian%20armed%20forces,Human%20Rights%20Watch%20said%20today](https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/03/28/mali-army-wagner-group-atrocities-against-civilians#:~:text=(Nairobi)%20%E2%80%93%20Malian%20armed%20forces,Human%20Rights%20Watch%20said%20today).

³⁵ Human Rights Watch (2016), ‘Mali: Abuses Spread South, Islamist Armed Groups’ Atrocities, Army Responses Generate Fear’, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/02/19/mali-abuses-spread-south>

Graphic 4: Growing military rule acceptability

Rejection of military rule

Percentage of respondents who 'disapprove' or 'strongly disapprove' of the idea that "the army comes in to govern".



Source: Afrobarometer (2024), African insights 2024: Democracy at risk – the people's perspective.

It is this recurring pattern that should give policymakers pause. There is an understandable temptation to accept coups that arrive with little bloodshed for reasons of expediency or immediate stability, but coups within coups may not provide better outcomes. The junta that emerged out of the May 2021 coup in Mali has resulted in deeper rupture with the West and increased insecurity. Allowing political power to become increasingly concentrated in the hands of military or security actors risks setting a state on a path to repeated upheaval, as even bloodless 'constitutional' coups cascade into recurrent patterns of military infighting and factionalism. Africa's faltering anti-coup norms are in dire need of reinforcement.

The anti-'constitutional coup' norm of Western partners should also be strengthened. Western double standards in Chad, where international actors have accepted the unconstitutional transition of power from Deby's father to son in the name of regional security, has not gone unnoticed by regional coup plotters, and 'disinhibiting' them and making their 'cost-benefit analysis more ambiguous'.³⁶

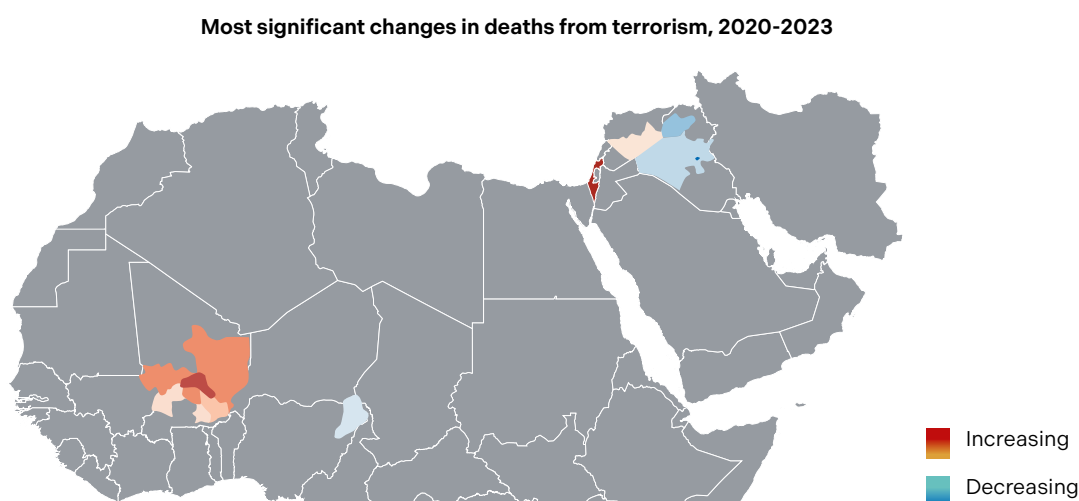
In the short-term, a result is also a region increasingly governed by military juntas who have struck new external alliances, indicating a shift in the relations between European countries and the Sahel. In Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, junta leaders have called for the withdrawal of foreign troops from their soil (including French and US forces and UN Blue Helmets) and have sought Russian, Iranian and Emirati, Turkish and other security providers' support.

³⁶ Wilen, N. (2024) 'Contagious coups in Africa? History of civil-military imbalance', *African Affairs*, 123(491), pp. 243-261. <https://doi.org/10.1093/afraf/adae011>

3. TERRORISM EPICENTRE

Terrorism has increased in parts of Africa at an alarming rate and some states are failing to contain it. The African Union's (AU) Algiers-based African Centre for the Study and Research on Terrorism reports a 400 percent rise in attacks in Africa, fuelling a 237 percent rise in deaths between 2012 and 2020.³⁷ **In 2023, sub-Saharan Africa accounted for 48 percent of global deaths from terrorism. Attacks have spread beyond historical hotspots such as the Sahel and the Horn of Africa to southern Africa and coastal regions of West Africa.**³⁸ According to ECOWAS, West Africa recorded the highest number of terrorist attacks in Africa, more than 1,800 in the first six months of 2023 resulting in nearly 4,600 deaths. Since the start of 2024, there have been 224 attacks a month on average by jihadi groups in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, up from 128 in 2021 according to the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data (ACLED).³⁹

Map 5: Terrorism epicentre shifting from the Middle East to the Sahel



Source: Institute for Economics and Peace (2024), Global Terrorism Index.

Terrorism has also become more difficult to define. **Terrorist insurrections have become more localised overtime, building on local grievances, and becoming intertwined with community and ethnic conflicts.**⁴⁰ Weak and corrupt regimes in the region have branded opponents 'terrorists' to delegitimize their objectives. Pro-government militia groups and government forces can also be the perpetrators of extreme violence that has radicalised targeted communities against state forces and provided support for extremist and terrorist groups.⁴¹ This is the case of the Fulani people, who have been stigmatised as terrorists by the Malian and Burkinabe governments and are overrepresented amongst civilian casualties of counter-offensives.⁴²

³⁷ African Centre for the Study and Research on Terrorism (2022), *Mid-Year Africa Terrorism Trend Analysis, January-June 2022, Report*, Algiers: ACSRT, <https://caert.org.dz/Medi-review/Terrorism-bulletin/Mid-Year%20Africa%20Terrorism%20Trend%20Analysis-%202022.pdf>

³⁸ International Institute for Security Studies (2023), 'From Global Jihad to Local Insurgencies: the Changing Nature of Sub-Saharan Jihadism,' in Ibid. (2023), *Armed Conflict Survey 2023*, London: Routledge, <https://web-opti-prod.iiss.org/en/publications/armed-conflict-survey/2023/from-global-jihad-to-local-insurgencies/>

³⁹ Lewis, D. et al. (2024) 'Why West Africa is now the world's terrorism hotspot', Reuters, 24 September 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/west-africa-becomes-global-terrorism-hotspot-western-forces-leave-2024-09-24/>

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Vines, A. and Wallace, J. 'Terrorism in Africa,' Chatham House Expert Comment, 15 September 2021, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2021/09/terrorism-africa>

⁴² Courtright, J. (2023), 'Ethnic Killings by West African Armies Are Undermining Regional Security' *Foreign Policy*, 7 March 2023, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/03/07/mali-burkina-faso-fulani-ethnic-killings-by-west-african-armies-are-undermining-regional-security/>

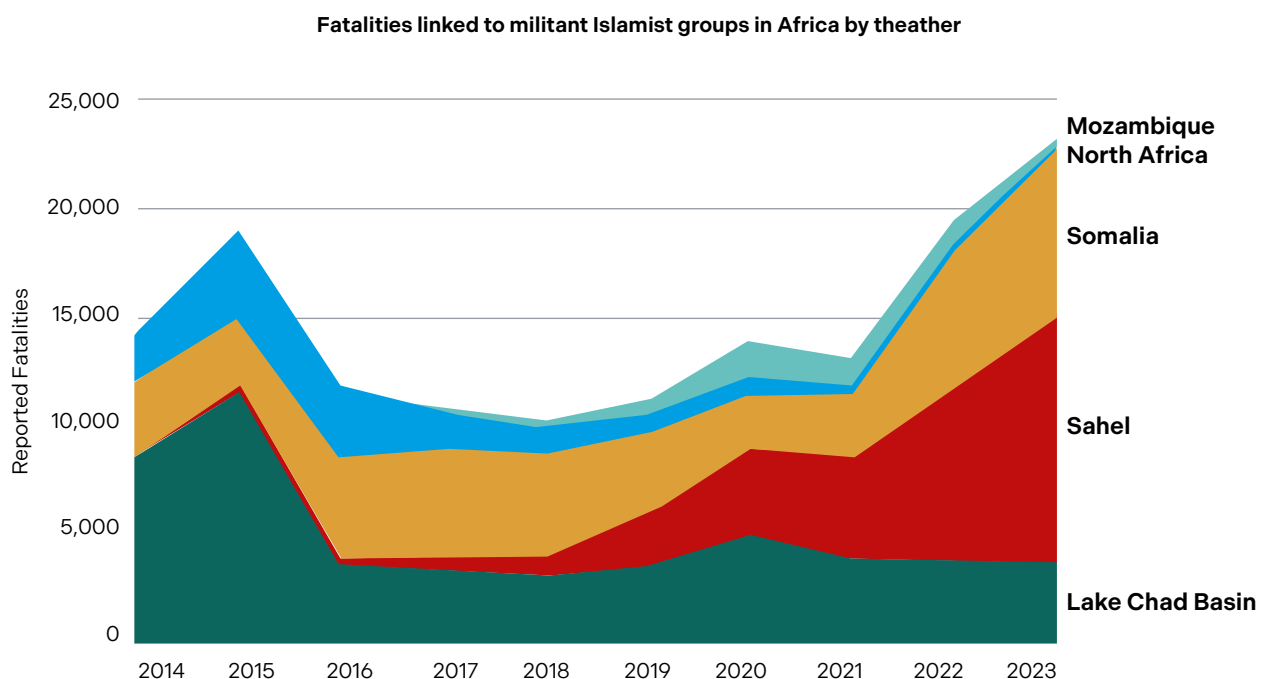
The reasons for joining terrorist groups have also changed, with economic factors replacing religious motives. A UNDP report detailed a 57 percent decrease in the number of people joining for religious reasons and a 92 percent increase in new recruits joining such groups for better livelihoods when compared to 2017.⁴³ This is likely to differ by sub-region - a 2011 report found ideological radicalisation in Mali comparable to Palestine and the Gaza strip, compared to largely economic drivers of mobilisation in the Mano River Union.⁴⁴

Continently, there are currently hot spots in the western Sahel and Lake Chad Basin, eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), in Somalia and Libya, and northern Mozambique, all of them crossing state borders.⁴⁵ The AU and its member states have adopted extensive policy frameworks on terrorism and violent extremism, such as the 1999 Algiers Convention on the Prevention and Combating of Terrorism and the related 2004 Protocol, and have deployed a few counter-terrorism-related peace-support missions in various parts of the continent.⁴⁶ But a regional counter-terrorism strategy and implementation plan passed by ECOWAS in 2013 has never been implemented. Its 2020-2024 Action Plan, adopted by ECOWAS in 2019, had a budget of US\$2.3 billion and eight priority areas range from pooling of efforts and coordination of counter-terrorism initiatives to promoting inter-community dialogue and preventing violent extremism.

Sahel Security

Militant Islamist violence in the Sahel has been growing for the past decade and has increased by 140 percent since 2020 and by more than 40 percent in 2022 alone – it represents 60 percent of all such violence in Africa.⁴⁷ This escalation has displaced more than 2.5 million people and killed more than 8,000 in 2022.⁴⁸

Graph 5: Drastic increase in Sahel share of fatalities linked to militant Islamist groups since 2021



Source: Africa Center for Strategic Studies (2024), 'Deaths Linked to Militant Islamist Violence in Africa Continue to Spiral', January 2024.

Although these groups are often characterized as belonging to one of two overarching banners — the Al-Qaeda-affiliated Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) — Al-Qaeda managed to unite four different groups of different ethnic backgrounds and regional interests into a single coalition of extremist fighters. JNIM today is composed of militants from the Tuareg and Fulani tribesmen from the Sahel and Maghreb, as well as ethnic Arabs from Burkina Faso.

These groups are responsible for over three-quarters of the violent events and associated fatalities recorded in Burkina Faso over the last five years (2019-2024), including around 200 people killed and 140 injured in the Burkinabe town of Barsalogho in August 2024, the latest in a long line of deadly attacks. According to the 2024 Global Terrorism Index, Burkina Faso suffered the worst impact from terrorism, with deaths increasing by 68 percent despite attacks decreasing by 17 percent.⁴⁹

However, **the Sahelian militants are more expressions of local conflicts than international jihadism. They exploit local issues such as competition over dwindling natural resources in rural areas, poor political representation in post-colonial states and anaemic economic prospects.** They are also deeply involved in organised crime and have benefited from kidnapping of local and foreign nationals. Seeking control of artisanal mining assets, especially gold, has become a particularly important driver (an echo to the diamond driven insurgencies of the Mano River Union states, 20 years ago). Demographics also contributes, as around 65 percent of the combined populations of Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger are under 30 and seeking a better life.⁵⁰

⁴³ United Nations Development Programme (2023), *Journey to Extremism in Africa: Pathways to Recruitment and Disengagement*, Report, Addis Ababa: UNDP, https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/2023-03/JTE_Pathways%20to%20Recruitment%20and%20Disengagement_2023%20%283%29.pdf

⁴⁴ Bøås, M. (2013), 'The Trouble in Mali—corruption, collusion, resistance', *Third World Quarterly* 34(7), pp. 1279-1292. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2013.824647>

⁴⁵ The Southern African Development Community (SADC) Mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo (SAMIDRC) deployed on 15 December 2023 to support the DRC government restore peace and security in the eastern DRC, which has witnessed an increase in conflicts and instability caused by the resurgence of armed groups. This effort replaced a failed military effort by the East African Community and comes as the UN peacekeeping mission, MONUSCO, commenced its gradual withdrawal.

⁴⁶ African Union (2004), 'Protocol to the OAU Convention on the Prevention and Combating of Terrorism', Ethiopia, Addis Ababa, https://au.int/sites/default/files/treaties/37291-treaty-0030_-_protocol_to_the_oau_convention_on_the_prevention_and_combating_of_terrorism_e.pdf

⁴⁷ Africa Center for Strategic Studies (2023), *Fatalities from Militant Islamist Violence in Africa Surge by Nearly 50 Percent*, Infographic, Washington DC: Africa Center for Strategic Studies, <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/fatalities-from-militant-islamist-violence-in-africa-surge-by-nearly-50-percent/>

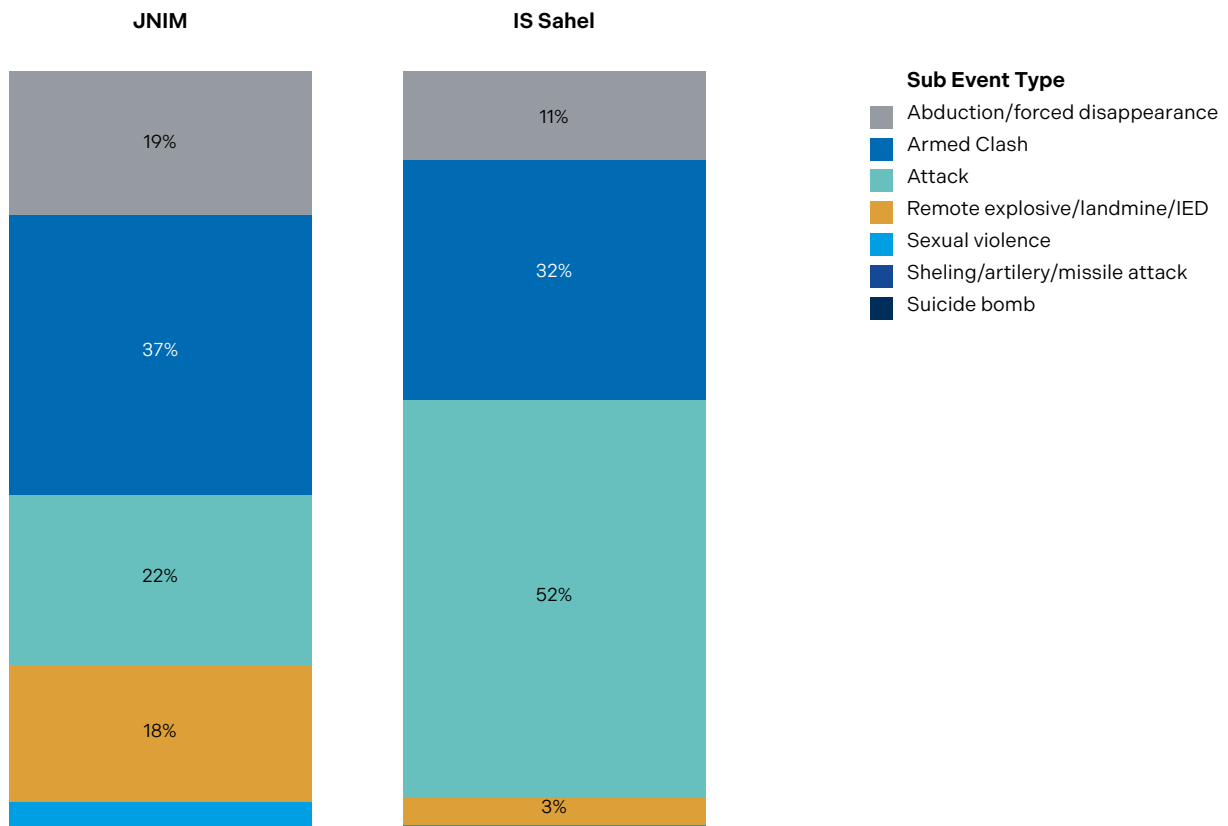
⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Institute for Economics and Peace (2024), *Global Terrorism Index 2024 report*, Report, Sydney: Institute for Economics and Peace, <https://www.visionofhumanity.org/maps/global-terrorism-index/#/>

⁵⁰ World Bank Group (2024), 'Data for Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, Niger', <https://data.worldbank.org/?locations=BF-TD-ML-MR-NE>.

Graph 6: Jihadist insecurity in the Sahel

Types of Violence employed by IS Sahel and JNIM
(January 2018 - December 2022)



Source: Armed Conflict Location and Event Data, 2023

The epicentre for jihadist activity is in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, particularly Liptako-Gourma in the borderlands of Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger and the Lake Chad Basin, the focal point of four overlapping crises⁵¹ - proxy conflict between Algeria and Morocco for influence in Western Sahara, the ongoing conflict in Libya, pervasive insecurity in the Lake Chad Basin, and post-coup Mali. Communal and intercommunal violence such as pastoralist-agriculturalist clashes has worsened the situation.

⁵¹ International Organisation for Migration, (2022), *Liptako Gourma Crisis Monthly Dashboard covering February 2024*, Report, Dakar: IOM, <https://dtm.iom.int/report-product-series/liptako-gourma-crisis-monthly-dashboard>.

Regional and international responses

There were signs of improvement at the end of the last decade (2016-18). Nigeria had improved its response to the Boko Haram insurgency in partnership with Chad, Cameroon and Niger through the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF). Cameroon had reduced the jihadist threat on its soil. Mali, with support of the French-led Operation Barkhane, the EU and other countries had also made some progress and were supporting the efforts of the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) operation.⁵³

Fast-forward to 2023 and the security situation in the region has deteriorated significantly and past efforts are regarded as flawed and to have failed. **ECOWAS has lost much of its credibility over the last decade and struggles to mediate or respond. The AU is also mostly ineffective, and the Maghreb Union REC is paralysed, particularly due to the poor relations between Algeria and Morocco.** Military campaigns to stamp out extremism are not proving to be successful and are driving popular unrest, disillusionment with democratic institutions and driving military coups.

Western military assistance has also had limited success and is now in decline. The French military initially intervened in Mali in 2013 as part of Operation Serval to stop the capture of the state by jihadists. This transitioned into the almost decade-long French led Operation Barkhane. By 2020, France had deployed 5,100 troops supported by 15,000 UN peacekeepers from around the world as part of MINUSMA. Despite some achievements including preventing foreign jihadists from putting down deep roots, Barkhane was put on hold after the 2020 coup and ended in late 2022 following a standoff between Bamako and Paris.⁵⁴ The EU-led special forces Task Force Takuba, set up in 2020, also withdrew from Mali and French forces left Burkina Faso in 2022. France negotiated to pull out of Niger following the 2023 coup and the US is under pressure to fully close its military facility there.⁵⁵

MINUSMA's mandate ended in 2023, during its 10th anniversary year, after the Malian government requested its termination saying it needed counter-terrorism support not blue helmets. MINUSMA had been most dangerous UN peacekeeping mission in the world while also failing to deliver on its peacekeeping mandate. It demonstrated that **traditional UN peacekeeping is not compatible with the challenges of asymmetric, transnational terrorism that Africa faces today.**

The coastal states of Côte d'Ivoire, Togo and Benin have increasingly become the new focus of French and other Western security investments. The coup in Niger in July 2023 has added further complexity to this region – and drawn even more attention to the coastal states.⁵⁶ In late 2023 the EU agreed to launch a new advisory mission in Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, and Togo alongside training for anti-terrorism operations and the US has been considering seeking to open a drone base in one of these coastal states.⁵⁷

⁵² Multinational Joint Task Force (2024), 'Home page' <https://mnjtfmm.org/>.

⁵³ United Nations Peacekeeping (2024), 'United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali webpage' <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/mission/minusma>.

⁵⁴ Doxsee, C. et al. (2022), *The End of Operation Barkhane and the Future of Counterterrorism in Mali*, Analysis, Washington DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/end-operation-barkhane-and-future-counterterrorism-mali>

⁵⁵ Schmauder, A. et al. (2020), *Takuba: a new coalition for the Sahel?* Analysis, The Hague: Clingendael Institute, <https://spectator.clingendael.org/en/publication/takuba-new-coalition-sahel>

⁵⁶ Muqthar, M. M. (2022), *The Threat of Violent Extremism to Coastal States: Ghana's Exposure to Violent Extremism*, West Africa Report: Ghana No. 003/2022, Report, Accra: West Africa Centre for Counter-Extremism, <https://waccegh.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Ghanas-Exposure-to-Violent-Extremism-WACCE-May-2022.pdf>

⁵⁷ Karr, L. (2024), *Africa File: America and Russia's Shifting Roles in West Africa*, Analysis, Washington DC: Institute for the Study of War, <https://understandingwar.org/backgrounder/africa-file-may-9-2024-america-and-russia%E2%80%99s-shifting-roles-west-africa>

Russia has made clear its desire to step into the resulting security vacuum. In September 2021, the Malian junta struck a security agreement with the Wagner Group for the deployment of 1,000 personnel in Mali at a monthly cost of US\$10.8m, and 500 Wagner personnel were deployed that December to Timbuktu supported by military equipment and helicopters.⁵⁸ Russia also entered a security and counterinsurgency arrangement with Burkina Faso in late 2023 and Niger in early 2024. Russia's representative on the Security Council described the coups in Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso as a reaction to "attempts to continue imposing neo-colonial models on African States" and emphasized that these three nations have "become the avant-garde of the countries willing to combat trans-African terrorism" and therefore deserve international support.⁵⁹

However, the Wagner Group's counter-terrorism performance has been underwhelming amid allegations of serious human rights abuses, especially in central Mali, and the formalisation of Wagner by the Russian state into the Africa Corps has resulted in doubts over its effectiveness and reliability. For example, dozens of Wagner/Africa Corps mercenaries are presumed dead after a lethal battle with Tuareg rebels in northern Mali in July 2024,⁶⁰ and Russia withdrew 100 paramilitary officers from its 300-strong 'Bear Brigade' in Burkina Faso to help in the war in Ukraine.⁶¹

Multiple Initiatives

Part of the problem has been the parallel implementation of multiple, often uncoordinated initiatives. Several regional and sub-regional counter-terrorism initiatives are currently active, including the Accra Initiative⁶² and the Nouakchott Process, and there are currently 21 different extant strategies on the Sahel.⁶³

- The FC-G5S was established in 2017 by Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger, to respond to the terrorism and implement measures to combat transnational crime.⁶⁴ This initiative had limited success, weakened by the exclusion of Senegal. In December 2023, Burkina Faso and Niger withdrew from the G5 Sahel, following Mali's departure in May 2022. On 6 December 2023 Chad and Mauritania, the remaining G5 Sahel countries, announced they were dissolving the G5 Sahel.

⁵⁸ International Institute for Security Studies (2022), *The Armed Conflict Survey 2022: Sub-Saharan Africa Regional Analysis*, Online analysis, London: International Institute for Security Studies, <https://www.iiss.org/online-analysis/online-analysis//2022/11/acs-2022-sub-saharan-africa>

⁵⁹ United Nations Security Council (2024), 'Lack of Coordinated Regional Responses in West Africa 'Increases Risk of Further Terrorist Expansion in Central Sahel Region', Delegate Tells Security Council', *United Nations Meetings Coverage and Press Releases*, SC/15764, 12 July 2024, <https://press.un.org/en/2024/sc15764.doc.htm>

⁶⁰ Donati, J. et al (2024), 'Exclusive: The identities of Wagner mercenaries lost in a Mali ambush revealed,' Reuters, 11 September 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/wagner-lost-veteran-fighters-mali-ambush-setback-russias-africa-campaign-2024-09-11/>

⁶¹ Njie, P. 'Russian fighters to leave Burkina Faso for Ukraine,' BBC News, 30 August 2024, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cg4yg0k976lo>

⁶² European Council on Foreign Relations (2020), 'Mapping African Regional Cooperation: Accra Initiative', online infographic, <https://ecfr.eu/special/african-cooperation/accra-initiative/>.

⁶³ African Union, 'Nouakchott Declaration of the 1st summit of the countries participating in the Nouakchott process on the enhancement of security cooperation and the operationalization of the African Peace and Security Architecture in the Sahelo-Saharan Region', Nouakchott, Islamic Republic of Mauritania, 18 December 2014, <https://www.peaceau.org/en/article/nouakchott-declaration-of-the-1st-summit-of-the-countries-participating-in-the-nouakchott-process-on-the-enhancement-of-security-cooperation-and-the-operationalization-of-the-african-peace-and-security-architecture-in-the-sahelo-saharan-region>

⁶⁴ Center for Preventive Action (2023), *Violent Extremism in the Sahel*, *Global Conflict Tracker*, Analysis, New York: Council on Foreign Relations, <https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/violent-extremism-sahel>



- The Accra Initiative was also created in 2017 as a response to the spreading of terrorism to the coastal states of West Africa. In November 2022 its member states (Benin, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Niger and Togo) announced a 10,000-troop initiative called the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF/AI) but this remains on paper only.
- The Nouakchott Process is aimed at strengthening regional and security cooperation and information sharing in combating terrorism. It is also mandated to operationalise the over-arching African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA) in the Sahelo-Saharan area.
- The Moroccan King's Royal Atlantic Initiative to Enhance Atlantic Ocean Access for Sahel Countries (of December 2023).⁶⁵

These overlapping initiatives have not been properly resourced or inclusive of all key state actors. For example, the G5 Sahel was supposed to take over from France's Barkhane's forces in the fight against terrorism. However, it mostly failed to combat terrorist groups, excluded key countries like Senegal and Nigeria, and sought to tackle security challenges the Sahel in isolation from the Maghreb and West Africa, ignoring their deep historical, political, geographical and security interdependencies. This weakened security mechanisms already in place, such as the Nouakchott Process, which was launched in 2013 and intended to bring together eleven states from the Mediterranean to the Gulf of Guinea to address the security crisis in this region as a whole.

The Accra Initiative aims to prevent spillover of terrorism from the Sahel, to address transnational organised crime and violent extremism in member countries' border areas, and to learn past lessons and improve coordination and intelligence sharing. At the conclusion of an Accra Initiative summit, the heads of state and government of the group "reaffirmed their commitment to mobilise the necessary indigenous resources to operationalise within a month the Multinational Joint Task Force of the Accra Initiative (MNJTF-AI)."⁶⁶ However, these ambitions have been quietly scaled back, and the effort seems to have lost momentum.

There have also been several joint efforts with the AU and UN to combat terrorism, such as the UN-AU technical group on preventing violent extremism and countering terrorism and the creation at the 77th Session of the United Nations General Assembly in September 2022 of a United Nations High-Level Panel on Security, Governance and Development in the Sahel.⁶⁷ Its mandate was to assess the situation in the Sahel and make recommendations on how to respond to the region's complex security and economic developmental challenges. The 2023 coup in Niger resulted in this initiative being moth-balled, although a report will be finally presented in New York at the 18th AU Peace and Security Commission and UN Security Council in late October 2024.

⁶⁵ Timbuktu Institute (2023), *Opening up the Sahel and connecting coastal countries: King Mohamed VI's «Atlantic Initiative» at stake*, Analysis, Dakar: African Center for Peace Studies, Timbuktu Institute, <https://timbuktu-institute.org/index.php/toutes-l-actualites/item/770-opening-up-the-sahel-and-connecting-coastal-countries-king-mohamed-vi-s-atlantic-initiative-at-stake>

⁶⁶ Aregbesola, I. (2022), 'Terrorism: Accra Initiative Member States to operationalise MNJTF,' News Agency of Nigeria, <https://www.nannews.ng/2022/11/23/terrorism-accra-initiative-member-states-to-operationalise-mnjtf/>

⁶⁷ UN Affairs (2022), 'High-level independent panel on security and development in crisis-torn Sahel region launched at UN,' UN News, 25 September 2022, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/09/1127931>

Funding, Defence Spending and Military training

Provision of sustainable and predictable funding for counter-terrorism operations has also been divisive, including in the UN Security Council. Economic constraints have continued to subdue defence expenditure in sub-Saharan Africa with regional spending accounting for under one percent of the global total over the last decade. A surge in Nigerian defence spending fuelled an uptick in the regional total but this has since contracted. Defence spending in Mali has increased every year in real terms since 2013, reaching US\$831m in 2022 and 40 percent of national budget in 2024.⁶⁸ This has not brought a commensurate improvement in security.

A lack of finance has hampered the launch of several security initiatives. ECOWAS states for example have drawn up plans to strengthen a regional standby force into what would in effect be a regional Counter Terrorism Force. However, this would come with a price-tag of between \$2.3bn and \$360m and remains unfunded. A compulsory contribution mechanism is on the table, and the UN, EU and other partners are also being consulted.

France and African members of the UNSC believe assessed contributions could fund some operations such as the proposed ECOWAS force, and the UN Secretary General has supported assessed contributions to fund counter-terrorism initiatives in Africa.⁶⁹ ECOWAS was also seeking the repurposing of some of MINUSMA's equipment for its counter-terrorism force, but this was not possible because of increased insecurity in Mali.

The professionalisation of regional military and security forces is a vital step to tackling violent extremism. **UNDP research suggests that about 70 percent of those who joined extremist groups were influenced by human rights abuses by state security forces, such as the killings or arrests of family members.** Security forces in some sub-Saharan countries have been accused of brutality and extrajudicial killings and weak judicial systems give victims little hope for justice.⁷⁰ International military assistance has also been used as a source of illicit rents, with some 45 percent of Niger's army budget between 2014 and 2019 having been embezzled.⁷¹

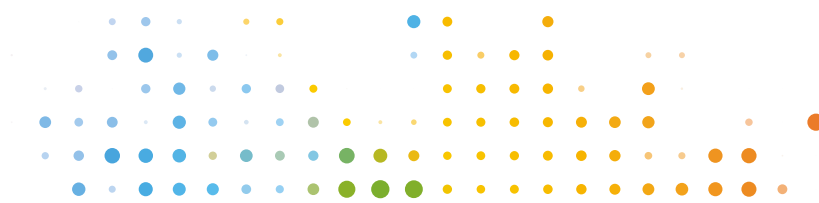
Several African militaries have professionalised in recent years. Senegal has increased its military standards and continues to receive support from France and the United States. Côte d'Ivoire has also been improving its training and is increasing its developmental inputs into northern regions fronting Mali. France has continued to provide discreet military training and intelligence. Togo is upgrading its military and seeking new support and Benin is also looking to improve its military response to address non-traditional threats, including inviting Rwanda to assist.

⁶⁸ International Institute for Security Studies (2023), 'Sub-Saharan Africa', The Military Balance 2023, London: Routledge. <https://www.iiss.org/publications/the-military-balance/the-military-balance-2023/>

⁶⁹ United Nations (2023), 'Africa Rich in Resources, But Not Support, Secretary-General Tells Regional Summit, Urging More Economic, Climate Action to Ensure Prosperous Future,' UN Meetings Coverage and Press Releases, Speech, Antonio Guterres, Ethiopia, Addis Ababa, 18 February 2023 <https://press.un.org/en/2023/sgsm21691.doc.htm>

⁷⁰ United Nations Development Programme (2023), *Journey to Extremism in Africa: Pathways to Recruitment and Disengagement*, Report, Addis Ababa: UNDP, https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/2023-03/JTE_Pathways%20to%20Recruitment%20and%20Disengagement_2023%20%283%29.pdf

⁷¹ Antil, A. and Vircoulon, T. (2024) 'Après l'échec sahélien, repenser le logiciel de la politique française en Afrique' Briefing, Paris : Institut Français des Relations Internationales, <https://www.ifri.org/fr/publications/briefings-de-lifri/apres-lechec-sahelien-repenser-logiciel-de-politique-francaise>



Mauritania provides a clear example of the importance of building an effective military. It was targeted by terrorists from 2005, proliferating in the country's vast ungoverned spaces,⁷² but has not experienced a single terrorist attack since December 2011. More than a decade of security is largely down to the successful reform of the military. An increase of soldiers' salaries and the creation of special units trained for desert warfare were both pivotal in improving their loyalty and motivation and addressing jihadist violence. The flows of illicit goods such as drugs and cigarettes were also targeted more efficiently by investing in modern Chinese-made boats for the national navy.

In addition, a localised strategy was devised for sensitive border areas with Mali, to instal checkpoints at traditional desert cross-border routes. Emphasis was also placed on intelligence gathering and sharing. The adoption of a multilayered approach, tailored to the challenges unique to the Sahel environment, proved efficient at neutralising the formerly pressing jihadist threat in Mauritania.

Guinea-Bissau: Political instability exacerbates extremism risk

The risk of violent extremism spreading to West Africa's coastal states has been highlighted in the above sections. Guinea-Bissau, one of the most fragile and least populous coastal states in the region, deserves particular attention. Persistent political instability, weak institutions and repeated interference with the constitutional order have left it acutely vulnerable to radicalisation. Since independence from Portugal in 1974, Guinea-Bissau has experienced at least 10 coups or attempted coups, and only one democratically elected president has completed a full term in office. The current incumbent, President Umaro Sissoco Embaló, was elected to a five-year term in December 2019, and ordered twice the dissolution of the country's legislature after two alleged attempted coups in February 2022 and late 2023.

Even before the coups, the President had displayed authoritarian tendencies, including human rights abuses and persecution of the opposition. The Bissau-Guinean state has consistently failed to deliver public goods, including security, justice, education, health and development. Public resources are managed with low levels of transparency and accountability. **Recurrent military interference in the constitutional order and frequent changes of government have impeded development and created an environment conducive to the rise of organised crime, especially drug trafficking since the 2000s, in which elites are complicit.** Endemic corruption and impunity have created a cycle of instability, further weakening the state and jeopardising its ability to guarantee protection and justice for its citizens.

⁷² Van Offelen, C. (2022), 'Terrorisme au Sahel: l'exception mauritanienne', *Conflits*, 22 August 2022, <https://www.revueconflits.com/terrorisme-au-sahel-lexception-mauritanienne/>



The Bissau-Guinean state displays many failings that have contributed to the spread of extremist groups elsewhere in the region:

- **Governance gaps:** The reach of the state beyond Bissau and some urban centres remains limited. Control over riverine borders and the frontier with the Senegalese region of Casamance has always been weak, and the administration is completely absent in many rural areas. These hard-to-govern areas have acted as conduits of trade and human migration for centuries.⁷³
- **Underdevelopment:** More than two thirds of the population live below the poverty line and Guinea-Bissau's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita is one of the lowest in the world. The World Bank has documented rising poverty levels since 2018.⁷⁴ Guinea-Bissau's economy remains reliant on cashews, which make up 90% of exports, and has the second lowest level of private investment in Africa.⁷⁵ This lack of economic diversity makes Guinea-Bissau vulnerable to external shocks, ranging from fluctuating global commodity prices to climatic irregularities. Cashews are also smuggled to Senegal and the Gambia to take advantage of arbitrage opportunities arising from the differences in shipping costs.
- **Scarce youth opportunity:** Age remains important in ethno-religious traditions, making the transition to adulthood more difficult and laying the foundation for inter-generational conflict. Scholarships offered to young Bissau-Guineans for study in Islamic schools, sponsored by Saudi Arabia and its partners, has further aggravated these tensions. Students return from the Arab world as adherents of a "pure" and authentic version of Islam that contrasts with the supposedly "impure" and heterodox Islam practised by their parents. In a study carried out by the Peace Observatory, this is a clear source of concern, especially among Muslims.⁷⁶

Poverty, chronic political instability and the structural fragility of the economy have created an environment conducive to radicalisation. State weakness and permeable borders have facilitated the entry and operation of extremist groups. In May 2024, for instance, 64 individuals of different nationalities suspected of receiving clandestine military training were arrested in the Gabu region.⁷⁷ These groups are able to recruit and radicalise disaffected individuals from within Guinea-Bissau, notably young people and women left susceptible to manipulation by economic and social vulnerability. Coupled with the corruption associated with drug trafficking, this has embedded a cycle of violence and instability.

An analysis, however, by the Peace Observatory shows that the Bissau-Guinean society remains tolerant despite its ethnic, linguistic and religious diversity. Years of struggle against Portuguese colonialism fostered a relatively strong national unity that has prevailed since independence, overriding cultural, ethnic and religious differences. Inter-ethnic cooperation is long-standing in Guinea-Bissau, notably within civil society, which plays a crucial role in preventing radicalism and violent extremism from taking root. NGOs and civil society organisations, such as the Guinean Human Rights League (Liga Guineense dos Direitos Humanos), the Instituto Marquês de Valle Flôr with its 'Peace Observatory - Nô Cudji Paz' project, have succeeded thanks to a people-centred, informed and proactive approach based on sustained dialogue.⁷⁸

⁷³ Chabal, P. and Green, T. (2016). *Guinea-Bissau: Micro-state to Narco-state*, London: Hurst and Co. p.5

⁷⁴ World Bank (2024), *Poverty, shared prosperity, and equity update*, Guinea Bissau, Report, Washington DC: World Bank. <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/099547106192426808/pdf/IDU15f28f4c12017146d719f4715ce3fb377803.pdf>

⁷⁵ World Bank (2020), *Escaping the Low-Growth Trap*, Guinea-Bissau - Country Economic Memorandum, 2020

⁷⁶ Boiro, H. (2024) *Estudo Compreensivo sobre a Radicalização e Extremismo Violento na Guiné-Bissau*, Instituto Marquês de Valle Flôr (IMVF) & Liga Guineense dos Direitos Humanos (LGDH), <https://www.imvf.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/estudo-compreensivo-extremismo-observatorio-da-paz-guine-bissau.pdf>

⁷⁷ Costa, A. (2024), 'Detidos 64 estrangeiros suspeitos de receberem treinamento militar secreto no país' Agência de Noticias da Guine, 7 May 2024, <https://ang.gw/detidos-64-estrangeiros-suspeitos-de-receberem-treinamento-militar-secreto-no-pais/geiros-suspeitos-de-receberem-treinamento-militar-secreto-no-pais/>

⁷⁸ Ibid.

Strong divides persist, notably in rural areas, and ethnic and identity-based cleavages are exacerbated by competition for scarce resources in a context of acute state weakness. Without effective intervention and a coordinated approach to strengthening institutions and governance, Guinea-Bissau will remain vulnerable to the challenges of extremism. **Efforts to counter radicalism that go beyond reactive security provision have already proved effective and should be nurtured.** Civil society plays a critical role at all levels of society in Guinea-Bissau, and cooperation between civil society organizations needs to be strengthened, from the national level to the grassroots, including traditional and religious leaders, young people and women, and across sectors, linking health and education, agriculture and rural development, combating gender-based violence and inequalities, and promoting peace and social cohesion.

Lessons from the continent

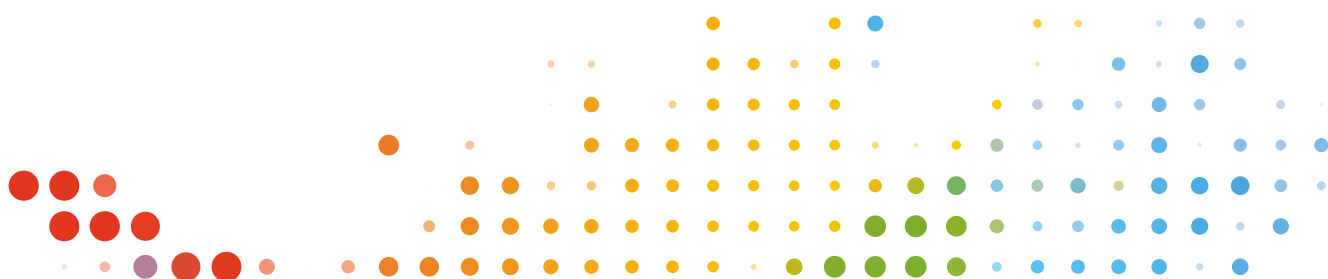
Two African counterinsurgency models offer relevant insights for the Sahel—Mauritania’s Special Intervention Groups (GSIs) and Cameroon’s Rapid Intervention Brigade (BIR). Both have been praised for their efficacy against bandits and militant groups, although human rights violations have sullied the Cameroonian unit’s reputation. The Nigerian military has also shown success, especially in NE Nigeria against Boko Haram and its efforts in partnership with Niger and Chad within the MNJTF.

There may also be lessons to be taken from Mozambique. The Mozambican insurgency has quickly worsened since October 2017 and has resulted in 4,000 dead and some 850,000 internally displaced. Armed militants known locally as al-Shabab (which means “youth” in Arabic and Swahili) have captured district centres, destroyed infrastructure, pillaged businesses and homes, abducted and killed. Islamic State (IS) affiliation is mostly a flag of convenience, and the largest cohort of foreign fighters are Tanzanians. This is in effect a sub-regional conflict, fuelled by local issues, marginalisation and poverty.⁷⁹

After Russia’s Wagner Group and other private military contractors had failed to contain the insurgents and realising that training the Defence and Security Forces of Mozambique to professional standards might take a generation, Mozambique’s President Nyusi sought Rwandan assistance.⁸⁰ In July 2021 Rwanda deployed a 1,000 strong contingent of the Rwanda Defence Force (RDF) and police, which was later doubled in size to 2,500. These deployments were successful in driving the insurgents back and disrupting their leadership, command structures and bases. SAMIM’s mandate ended in 2024 although South African and Tanzanian forces remain on bilateral basis. Rwanda increased its on the ground presence to over 4,000 in 2024.

⁷⁹ Vines, A. (2021), *Responding to Mozambique’s Islamic Insurgency: Will Foreign Military Assistance Make a Difference?* Online Article, Washington DC: Georgetown Journal of International Affairs, <https://gjia.georgetown.edu/2021/09/15/responding-to-mozambiques-islamic-insurgency-will-foreign-military-assistance-make-a-difference/>

⁸⁰ International Institute for Security Studies (2022), *Rwanda’s ambitions as a security provider in Sub-Saharan Africa, Comment*, London: International Institute for Security Studies <https://www.iiss.org/publications/strategic-comments/2022/rwandas-ambitions-as-a-security-provider-in-sub-saharan-africa/>



The RDF success in Mozambique, and CAR before it, has been noticed in West Africa and the Sahel, and Kigali has started to market the Rwanda Defence Force as a highly trained and well-equipped counter-insurgency force.⁸¹ On 17 April 2023, President Paul Kagame visited Benin after a September 2022 request by President Patrice Talon for assistance to combat the overspill of jihadists in the northern region. Vincent Biruta, Minister for Foreign Affairs of Rwanda, stated to the UN Security Council in March 2023 that traditional peacekeeping missions alone have not proved effective enough to address terrorism and violent extremism.⁸² He underlined the importance of robust and pragmatic approaches, tailored to local contexts, highlighting the bilateral mechanism that Rwanda deployed in Mozambique and CAR at the request of both governments. He also highlighted that the European Peace Facility supported the deployment of the RDF in Mozambique. But although Benin has sought engagement of Rwanda in its security arrangements, ECOWAS has historically frowned upon other African state actors involving themselves in its security affairs (Angola in Guinea-Bissau and South Africa in Côte d'Ivoire) and it remains to be seen whether Rwanda expands its security offer in this region.

Mozambique also offers an illustration of successful post-conflict stabilisation achieved through matching disarmament and demobilisation with remedy to long-standing grievances over political marginalisation and inequality. A 2019 peace deal saw the last guerrilla fighters from Renamo demobilised in 2023 via a process that combined demilitarization with decentralisation and devolution, addressing exclusion, promoting reconciliation, and rebalancing income distribution. Mirko Manzoni, then Personal Envoy of the Secretary General for Mozambique observed that 'Putting people first pays off in peace dividends', including pensions for those demobilised and innovative strategies to spur a broad range of actors, including the private sector, to embed the long-term sustainability of peace.⁸³

Without effective intervention and a coordinated approach to strengthening institutions and governance, Guinea-Bissau will remain vulnerable to these challenges. However, civil society plays a critical role at all levels of society in Guinea-Bissau, and preventative efforts to counter radicalism and violent extremism that go beyond merely reactive and security-oriented approaches have already proved effective. NGOs and civil society organisations such as the Guinean Human Rights League, the Instituto Marquês de Valle Flôr and the Peace Observatory with their 'Nô Cudji Paz', have found success with a people centred approach, based on informed and proactive strategies and actions.⁸⁴

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² United Nations (2023), 'Speakers Warn Security Council Terrorism Spreading across Africa at Alarming Rate, Call for Greater Support, Enhanced International, Regional Cooperation,' SC/15245, 28 March 2023, <https://press.un.org/en/2023/sc15245.doc.htm>

⁸³ United Nations (2023), 'Security Council Open Debate on Peace and Security in Africa, Personal Envoy Mirko Manzoni' Speech, Mirko Manzoni, United Nations Security Council, New York, 30 March 2023, <https://dppa.un.org/en/security-council-open-debate-peace-and-security-africa-personal-envoy-mirko-manzoni>

⁸⁴ Boiro, H. (2024) *Estudo Compreensivo sobre a Radicalização e Extremismo Violento na Guiné-Bissau*, Instituto Marquês de Valle Flôr (IMVF) & Liga Guineense dos Direitos Humanos (LGDH), March 2024, <https://www.imvf.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/estudo-compreensivo-extremismo-observatorio-da-paz-guine-bissau.pdf>

4. CONCLUSIONS

Western policymakers must acknowledge that the twin trends of coups and proliferating security threats are not separate phenomena, operating in isolation. They are umbilically linked through a region-wide elite refusal to meet or even acknowledge the depth of popular need and grievance. This represents a pervasive failure of governance that has at best been overlooked and at worst actively facilitated by a myopic Western preoccupation with short-term and counterproductive hard security.

In March 2023, Mozambique, during its first ever presidency of the UN Security Council in New York, hosted two important open debates, on countering terrorism in Africa and silencing the guns.⁸⁵ There was more consensus than division on the remedies. Many speakers in the debates highlighted the need to address root causes such as poverty and inequality, promote the rule of law and human rights, and to craft a multilateral counter-terrorism strategy that is fit for purpose in the digital age.

Past engagement has been focused on stabilisation and supporting state security. A 'near-total militarisation'⁸⁶ of the Sahel policy of external actors such as France has been counterproductive in addressing violence with root causes in marginalisation and scarcity. Strategies have proliferated, but have lacked synergy and coordination, and responses have failed to adequately address the regional and transnational dimensions of the crisis. Governments in the region have become increasingly illegitimate and national armies as feared as terrorists by local populations - in effect turning fragile states to brittle ones. Civil society has been weakened by decades of policy failure, and popular support for recent coups was broader than many observers like to acknowledge.

It is increasingly probable that the region will experience further coups and that security challenges will persist. In the short-term, a key priority is to prevent key ECOWAS coastal states from being further affected by regional fragmentation, terrorism and coups, and to prevent contagion to unaffected states such as Guinea-Bissau and Sierra Leone. For the West, continuity of the Déby administration in Chad and its preparedness to continue partnership with the French and US military will likely remain a priority. Splits in Boko Haram in Nigeria and Cameroon also provides an opportunity, as does Niger's signalled willingness to re-integrate into the MNJTF. This resumption of military diplomacy is a step towards rebuilding West African unity, and reveals that Niamey might be realising its lack of options to fight terrorism.

But narrow security cannot be the only priority. Many citizens in the Sahel view their governments as part of the problem, making it essential to re-invigorate the social contract through addressing underlying grievances and offering tangible improvements in livelihoods and governance. An effective strategy to stabilize the region should therefore prioritize humanitarian response and small-scale, sub-national development projects in areas affected by insecurity. These approaches have already been implemented - in 2022, for example, Côte d'Ivoire launched its 'Programme Special du Nord', blending a traditional security presence with investments in public infrastructure and social programmes for the unemployed youth in the North of the country⁸⁷ - examples which can be extended and learned from. There is an urgent need for West African states and its regional institutions to deliver human security, including through investment in viable institutions and better governance. Addressing the widening crisis in the Sahel requires a multifaceted policy response. Fresh thinking is needed. ■

⁸⁵ United Nations (2023), 'Peace and Security in Africa: The Impact of Development Policies in the Implementation of the Silencing the Guns Initiative' Security Council, 9299th Meeting, New York, 30 March 2023, <https://media.un.org/en/asset/k1z/k1ztkisws6>

⁸⁶ Posthumus, B. (2024), 'Thinking about the Sahel', Wordpress, <https://bramposthumus.wordpress.com/tag/sahel/>

⁸⁷ Eizenga, D. and Gnanguenon, A. (2024), *Recalibrating Coastal West Africa's Response to Violent Extremism*, Briefing, Washington DC: Africa Center for Strategic Studies.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Dr. Alex Vines is Director of the Africa Programme at Chatham House and also serves as Research Director for Regions. Previously, he has held various roles at Chatham House, including Managing Director for Risk and Ethics, Director for Regional Studies and International Security, and Director for Area Studies and International Law. Dr. Vines has worked as a Senior Researcher at Human Rights Watch, specializing in business and human rights, and has chaired the UN Panel of Experts on Côte d'Ivoire (2005–2007) as well as served on the UN Panel of Experts on Liberia (2001–2003). He has also been part of several Commonwealth Observer Groups, including to Nigeria (2023), Mozambique (2019 and 2024), and Ghana (2016), and served as a UN election officer in Mozambique (1994) and Angola (1992). Dr. Vines is an Assistant Professor at Coventry University, sits on the board of EG Justice - an NGO focused on Equatorial Guinea - and is a member of the advisory board of the John & Elnora Ferguson Centre for African Studies (JEFCAS) at the University of Bradford.

Romane Dideberg is a Research Assistant with the Africa Programme at Chatham House. Her research primarily focuses on francophone Africa, with a particular emphasis on West Africa and the Sahel. Her areas of interest include the political economy of violence and conflict, resource governance, African statehood, and state-society relations. Romane holds a bachelor's degree in political science from the University of Maastricht in the Netherlands and a dual master's degree in international relations from Sciences Po, Paris, and the London School of Economics.



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