



**Centre of Excellence
Defence Against Terrorism**



NATO'S REGIONAL CHALLENGES

TERRORISM AND COUNTER-TERRORISM IN SAHEL



Edited by János BESENYŐ

**Centre of Excellence Defence Against Terrorism
Ankara, Türkiye, 2025**



NATO'S REGIONAL CHALLENGES TERRORISM AND COUNTER-TERRORISM IN SAHEL

János BESENYŐ
Editor

**NATO COE-DAT
Research Project**

**Centre of Excellence - Defence Against Terrorism
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NATO'S REGIONAL CHALLENGES: TERRORISM AND COUNTER-TERRORISM IN SAHEL

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Preface

The Centre of Excellence Defence Against Terrorism (COE-DAT) is pleased to present this book on the topic of NATO's Regional Challenges: Terrorism and Counter-Terrorism in Sahel.

Many political analysts have been forecasting inevitable conflicts driven by the different challenges characterized by regions where the Alliance might have to deal with the situation that no other power can or wish to handle singlehandedly. Amongst these geographically determined areas stand out a vast part of Africa, that is facing great problems generated by climate change, overpopulation, social discrepancies, ideological differences, poverty and armed conflicts including terrorism. This area includes countries like Senegal, Gambia, Mauritania, Guinea, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Chad, Cameroon and Nigeria or on commonly understood as the SAHEL region.

Amongst many international and national efforts to support better security and well-being of the people living in the vast dry land also NATO planners are monitoring closely their strategic southern flank in order to be prepared to conduct wide range of activities. One of these is supporting counter-terrorism with the toolset that only the Alliance has. To be prepared includes updated Situational Awareness or better to say, Situational Understanding.

In order to support planners, decision-makers or troops of NATO to be deployed to the region COE DAT launched a research project having a large sum of well-known SMEs from around the world. The research aimed for providing an appreciation of the area discussing geography, history, culture and also addressing the challenges that affect the everyday life of the people who must face with them. The focus is directed on the evolving terrorism and its direction with the aim of finding answers and recommendations to the Alliance to counter it as this book concludes.

Halil Sıddık AYHAN

Colonel (TUR A)

Director, COE-DAT

Acknowledgments

The Centre of Excellence Defence Against Terrorism (COE-DAT) is proud to complete this book to address NATO's Regional Challenges: Terrorism and Counter-Terrorism in Sahel. The topics captured in this project represent a deep dive in the geographical, socio-cultural understanding of the area of SAHEL and more importantly, it offers NATO Allies and partner valuable recommendations to address emerging threats and enhance the effectiveness of counter-terrorism efforts.

I would like to express our gratitude to the researchers including Adeyemi Saheed Badewa, Jean-Pierre Cabestan, László Csicsmann, Norbert Daruka, Nail Elhan, Viktor Glied, Katalin Horváth, Péter Gergely Juhász, Szilvia Veress Juhászné, Krisztina Kállai, László Lukács Péter Miletics, Buyisile Ntaka, Pieter Van Ostaeyen, Attila Pánovics, Tibor Pintér, Scott Nicholas Romaniuk, Animesh Roul, Zsolt Szabó, Béla Szilágyi, Mariann Tánczos, Elem Eyryce Tepeciklioğlu, Ali Onur Tepeciklioglu, András Istvan Türke, Tamás Csiki Varga, Dávid Vogel, Zoltán Vörös for their invaluable support to and our special thanks to János Besenyő for leading of this project that made this book a reality.

Last but not least, my gratitude goes to the COE-DAT staff for their dedication and professionalism that ensured the success of this project.

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DISCLAIMER

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- Works on automated detection of religiously motivated hate speech and ISIS's use of Quranic citations appear in journals such as Computational Linguistics and Intelligent Text Processing and interdisciplinary studies on Salafism.

- He is cited in high-profile reports, including those from the RAND Corporation on insights from the Bin Laden archive and analyses of Belgian radical networks.

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He has published widely in leading journals and policy outlets, including CTC Sentinel, Jamestown Foundation's Terrorism Monitor and Militant Leadership Monitor, Global Network on Extremism & Technology (GNET), Geopolitical Monitor, Firstpost, and CBW Magazine. Roul has co-authored and co-edited several volumes, notably *Handbook of Terrorist and Insurgent Groups : A Global Survey of Threats, Tactics, and Characteristics* (Routledge/CRC Press, 2024), *Money Laundering and Terrorism Financing through Hawala Money Transfer Operators* (Palgrave, forthcoming, 2026), and *Indian Mujahideen: Computational Analysis and Public Policy* (Springer, 2013). Some of his notable book chapters include "Bioterrorism and the Biological Weapons Convention : A Review of Five Decades of Evolving Treaty Framework" (Pentagon Press, 2025), "Exacerbating the Pandemic? Assessing the Critical Role of Religious Congregations in the Indian Subcontinent" (Routledge, 2022) and "Coronavirus as God's Soldier: Assessing the Divine Retribution Narrative of Religiously Motivated Organisations" (Pentagon Press, 2020).

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As an author or contributor to more than 260 publications, his expertise is backed by an established network of scholars in the field. At the strategic level he was a participant in formulating national security and defense strategies, as well as contributing to various strategic foresight analysis processes for Hungary and NATO.

In 2025, his research focus is European defense industrial cooperation, and the effects of Russia's aggression to Ukraine on the armed forces modernization programs of Central European countries. His latest major upcoming publication is 'Hungary's defense policy in the 21st century' (Magyarország védelempolitikája a 21. században), co-authored by Péter Tálas – a monograph outlining the trends and strategic processes formulating Hungarian defense in national and allied (NATO, EU) frameworks.

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PART I: REGIONAL OVERVIEW

CHAPTER 1

Geography of The Sahel

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Abstract

Sahel

The Sahel is a narrow band of semi-arid land that forms a transition zone between the Sahara to the north and the savannas to the south. It is made up of flat, barren plains that stretch roughly 5,400 kilometers (3,300 miles) across Africa, from Senegal to Sudan. It is characterized by the strong seasonality of the climate with a short rainy season and a long intensely dry season. Its limits are not readily definable. Conditions in the zone vary markedly from north to south with rainfall, and also over short and long periods of time as the rainfall varies. The long term variations in climate have left a strong impression on the landscape and soils of the region. It is a harsh environment but has some advantages for human occupation.

The Sahel reaches from the Red Sea to the Atlantic Ocean, measuring up to 600 miles across from north to south. From east to west, the Sahel includes large areas within several countries – Eritrea, Sudan, Chad, Niger, Mali, and Mauritania. A few other countries have small corners of the Sahelian landscape – South Sudan, Central African Republic, Cameroon, Nigeria, Algeria, Burkina Faso, the Gambia, and Senegal. As a transition zone of land, the Sahel is viewed slightly differently by some scholars, so sometimes this list of countries may vary. After all, the borders of this region are not obvious, being neither coastlines nor the international boundaries between countries.

As appropriate for a transition zone, the Sahel presents some landscape and climate like the adjacent Sahara Desert, but progressively southward displays landscape and climate that are wetter, but not yet like tropical rainforest. Although technically tropical, basically 10°-20° N latitude, the Sahel produces wide variation in

climate, including rainfall. In fact, the Sahel shows some of the planet's greatest climate variability.

Keywords: *Sahel, semi-arid land, transition zone, climate, environment*

Introduction

The Sahel belt is a region of the northern African continent, stretching west-eastwards, with its own particular natural geography. Situated between the Atlantic Ocean and the Red Sea, the region, which is about 6 000 km long and varies in width from 450 to 1 000 km, forms a geo-climatological dividing line on the continent. Today's heightened great power rivalries have enhanced the geopolitical territory, which is part of the traditional sub-Saharan strategic buffer zone. The territory of the Sahel is essentially part of the Low Africa region, with an average altitude of 450 m above sea level, but its easternmost areas are linked to the so-called High Africa margin (Ethiopian Highlands), which rises above 1000 m. The delimitation of the region is not without controversy, and there are differences of interpretation between the natural geography and the political geography - and geopolitical - dimensions. In this short paper, however, we will attempt to describe the Sahel region in terms of its geographic-climatic characteristics (Cohen, 2009: 417-434, OECD 2014: 27-73, Vörös, 2024: 49-51)

The Sahel

An important macro-geographic feature of the area is its size: the Sahel covers an area of 3 053 200 km², which may vary according to the dimension of the interpretation domain. It is likely that the discrepancies in spatial extent are consistent with the climatological processes that have influenced the geographical characteristics of the African continent since (at least) the last glaciation, determining the north-south shifts of the southern boundary of the largest zonal desert territory on Earth, shaped by the descending air currents (Gábris, 2002: 15-16, Rudl, 2010: 1293, UNISS 2024, Vörös, 2024: 49-54).²

The development, the desiccation process, which (also) determines the ecological spatial patterns, is changing the spatial dynamics and movement of the Sahel region by modifying the boundaries of the desert zone. The Sahel, which forms the northern fringe of the Sudanese savannah belt, is a transitional semiarid zone in cultural and socio-economic terms. Historically, it has been - and still is - influenced by the proximity of the great (west-east) civilisational fault line in Africa, by ecological vulnerability, in relation to the lifestyle and economic traditions of Christian-Muslim

² In fact, there are several conceptions of the Sahel belt. The broadest political geographic interpretation is that the region comprises 12 (total area - not the same as the Sahel territory - 9.96 million square kilometres, while others suggest that it comprises 5 or 6 state territories (about 5-6 million km²).

communities (nomadic mobility vs. settled farming) and ethno-cultural divides. All this is closely linked to the regional rise of extremism and the increasing geopolitical activity of external powers (Hunyadi, 1995: 307-308., Fage-Tordoff, 2004: 125, 163-184, Gábris, 2002: 15, Vörös, 2024: 50, 54).

Boundaries

The northern boundary of the Sahel (meaning coast) is marked by the arid zonal desert and the southern boundary by the Sudan savannah belt. Its natural dividing lines (in physical geographic terms) are bounded to the north by a series of tropical Saharan island ranges and to the south by the rim ridges, thresholds and plateaus that separate the region from the sea. In the north, the island mountains/plates of ancient crystalline rocks separating large sedimentary basins, many with specific ecological characteristics, stretch from Mauritania to the edge of the Ethiopian highlands. The geomorphological features are the Adrar plateau, composed of Precambrian rocks (granite and quartzite) from north-western Mauritania in the western Sahel, and the eroded granite igneous metamorphic rocks of the Iforas (Adrar des Ifoghas), partly overlain by sandstone, in north-western Mali. The latter massif, at an altitude of about 900 m above sea level, covers an area of 250 000 km² (Thorp, 1969: 25-47, Black-Ba-Ball et al., 1979: 543-564, Benan-Deynoux, 1998: 283-302, Gábris, 2002: 9, Schülter, 2006: 152-159, Deynoux-Affaton-Trompette-Villeneuve, 2006: 397-426, Trape, 2009:, Bouabdellah-Slack, 2016: 3-81).³

In the middle of the northern geomorphological boundary of the Sahel belt are the Air Mountains, a complex system of Precambrian basement rocks, circular Palaeozoic sub-volcanic ring structures and Cenozoic volcanism. The crystalline massif, which was formed during the Pan-African orogeny, is almost 2 000 m high and covers an area of 84 000 km². This lineage also includes the Tibesti Mountains, northeast of the massif (gneiss, granite) in the central region of Niger, in northern Chad and southern Libya, with a height of 3 415 m, and a central mass of volcanoclastic rocks, with shield volcanic activity from the Oligocene to the Holocene. The massif, formed by the uplift of ancient crystalline basement rocks, is covered by thick volcanic layers. The most easterly member of the middle part of the natural boundary is the Ennedi Plateau in the north-eastern part of Chad State, which extends into the south-eastern part of Libya. Layers of ancient sedimentary rocks, hundreds of millions of years old, mark the evolutionary process of landscape history. Covering an area of about 60 000 km², the plateau's morphological features have been shaped by wind and water erosion. The complexity of erosion, sedimentation and tectonic processes defines the geological sub-layer of the plateau. The process started in the Palaeozoic (540-250 million years ago) with the deposition of sand and limestone layers during

³ The higher elevations of the Adrar, which means mountain in Berber, are also suitable for crop production. The Iforas Mountains, in the Kidal region of Mali, were also essentially formed during the Pan-African orogeny.

marine transgression. In the Late Cretaceous (100 million years ago), tectonic forces uplifted the marine sedimentary strata and the landscape was finally shaped by the abrasive action of water and the erosive action of wind. In addition, it is important to stress the large-scale presence of shale glacial formations (Grove, 1960: 18-27, Gourgaud-Vincent, 2004: 261-290, Schülter, 2006: 68-71, 176-179, Permenter-Oppenheimer, 2007: 609-626, Bouabdellah-Slack, 2016: 3-81, Ghienne-Moussa-Saad et al.2023: 63-84, Knight, 2023: 41-48, Miletics, 2024: 5-9).

The first of the eastern components of the northern natural divide of the Sahel is the Ouaddaï plateau, located in the eastern part of the Chadian political space, near the Sudanese border. It is a morphological formation that slopes towards the Lake Chad sedimentary basin, in a similar way to the Ennedi plateau, i.e. towards the south-west, and whose masses overlying the Sudanese territory form the Darfur Massif. Its importance is due, among other things, to its eco-regional characteristics, as a watershed between Lake Chad and the Nile basin. The geological formation affected by the four magmatic events is largely composed of Precambrian-age granitic and quartzitic rocks, which form the core area of the Saharan meta-craton. It includes the Marra Mountains, another higher physical geological feature of the Sahel. The Precambrian basement rocks (gneiss, granite) are built up by Late Tertiary (Miocene?) volcanic sediments, with the presence of Nubian sandstone and limestone to the east. In the Red Sea coast of the African continent, the natural northern boundary of the Sahel is marked by the Itbay (Red Sea Hills) and the northern area of the Ethiopian highlands. The Red Sea Mountains are composed of prominent Neoproterozoic (900-550 million years old) rocks of the Arabian-Nubian Shield. The present morphology was formed in the Oligocene (34-23 million years ago), coeval with the formation of the Red Sea basin. It has an altitude of almost 3000m above sea level, but has been extensively eroded, a process which removed limestone and sandstone overburden, exposing bedrock in many places (Hobbs, 1918: 357-363, Lebon-Robertson 1961: 30-45, Sampsell, 2003: 25-28, Schlüter, 2006: 218-221, Bouabdellah-Slack, 2016: 3-81, Williams, 2019: 33-58, 257-266, Shellnutt-Yeh-Pham-Lee, 2019: Djerosse-Armin Zeh,-Isseini, M. et al. 2021:;).

The Ethiopian highlands (Abyssinian plateau), located north-west of the Great Rift Zone of East Africa (part of High Africa), have an average altitude of 1500 m. About 75 million years ago, the land began to rise and 30 million years ago a thick basaltic plateau began to form. The plateau was split in two by the Rift Valley, and the tearing of the continental crust allowed the formation of shield volcanoes. The oldest geomorphological formations in the region are Palaeozoic (Ordovician), the youngest are Cenozoic (Cheesman, 1936: 1-12, Schlüter, 2006: 98-102, Coltorti-Dramis-Ollier, 2007: 287-296, Bouabdellah-Slack, 2016: 3-81).

The natural boundaries of the Sahel belt can be more or less delineated to the south by the geological formations separating large internal sedimentary basins, which lie in a west-east direction south of 10° N latitude, but are not part of the semi-arid Sahel. Its first element is the plateau of Fouta-Djallon, an average altitude of 900 m above sea level, which is composed of stepped Ordovician sandstone, Silurian shale and Tertiary subvolcanic (basal) igneous dolerite formations on granitic bedrock and is the westernmost part of the Guinea Highlands (North Guinea Threshold). The surface of the North Guinea Threshold/Ridge is varied with plateaus (300-500 m) and prominent mountain peaks (over 1500 m). South of the Sahel, the much wetter area is the headwaters of several West African rivers and is dominated by Precambrian and Palaeozoic rocks (granite, mica and quartzite). The eastern part of the threshold, which forms the southern edge of the West African Craton, is rich in valuable resources (gold, iron ore, diamonds) and contains metamorphic and granitic layers of the Birmanian Formation, which is composed of greenstones. At the eastern end of the threshold is the Jos plateau (Bauchi plateau), which has specific ecological characteristics. The plateau covers an area of about 8600 km² and has an average altitude of almost 1300 m. The Jos is characterised by the dominance of three rocks: the oldest granitic layers date from the Proterozoic to the late Cambrian-Ordovician period. The younger granitic assemblages date from the Jurassic period. The basaltic strata of volcanic origin were deposited from the Pliocene of the Cenozoic. The geomorphologic-physical geological formation consists of eroded gneiss formations characterized by granitic intrusions. The area is rich in various ores (tin, iron, columbite, niobium). The Jos area also contains small amounts of tantalite, tungsten, kaolin, zircon, uranium, coal and precious metal ores (gold and silver). Mining explains the clearing of the original forests, which today makes the plateau a grassy savannah for livestock and crop production (Higson, 1964:1, 3, Boher-Abouchami-Michard et al. 1992: 345-369, Milési-Ledru-Feybesse et al. 1992: 305-344, Schlüter, 2006: 114-117., 180-185, Soumah, 2008: 21-22, Besenyő-Miletics 2013:12., 14, Mallo-Wazoh, 2014: 25-34, World Bank 2017: 10-43).

The southern natural dividing line of the central part of the Sahel is formed by the Adamawa-Yade/Karre Mountains and the eastern part of the Azande Threshold, the Bongo Mountains. Both geological-geological formations are part of the Upper/Northern Guinea Highlands or Highlands. The geological link between the western elevated terrains of the Jade Mountains -Yade Massif - Adamawa Plateau - Karre Mountains and the varied and gradually rising Bongo Massif/Massif des Bongo to the east and northeast, and the Tondou Massif on the eastern border, is the Azande Threshold. The Adamawa plateau has an average elevation of 1000 m and is built up mainly by Precambrian crystalline rocks, but there is also geographic evidence of former volcanic activity in the region. The Precambrian basement rocks were uplifted during the Pan-African orogeny, with granitic, diuretic intrusions intruding into the

gneiss, shale basement layers. The orogenic cycle resulted in the formation of Gondwana (ancient supercontinent) at the end of the Neoproterozoic. The scarcely dissected plateau of the peneplain and undulating ridge of the Azande Sill, which stretches southwest-northeast, is a watershed on the northern margin of the Central African region, and the gradually subsiding granitic plateau is replaced by sandstone surfaces extending eastwards to the foothills of the Bongo and Tondou mountains. The two massifs, often considered as a single geological unit, are perhaps the most important African watershed (Nile, Congo, Chari River-Lake Chad), with a highest point of 1330 m. The Proterozoic granitic bedrock is overlain by sandstone beds in the northeast. The final eastern, physical geographical-geomorphological feature of the southern natural divide is the north-western part of the Ethiopian highlands of High Africa (Boulvert, 1996: 83, Poudjom Djomani-Diamant-Wilson, 1997:317-327, Nnange-Djomani-Fairhead-Ebinger, 2001: 29-35, Toteu-Penaye-Poudjom Djomani, 2004: 73-85, Kröner-Stern, 2005: 1-12, Gábris, 2008: 34-41, Balogh-Besenyő-Miletics-Vogel 2016: 10-30, Ngalamo, 2019-2020: 15-18).

The boundaries of the Sahel thus more or less correspond to the lines drawn by 10-20° N. This reflects the region's adaptation to the climatic zonation of Africa, since its territory belongs to the so-called uni-seasonal rain belt, more precisely to the tropical dry savannah climate type. Geomorphologically, the Sahel is associated with the southern edge of the northern dry interior basin of the African continent. The vast geographic extent of the sedimentary basin, also known as the geosyncline, is dissected by tropical clasts. The outcrops of the Palaeozoic basin were generally affected by active volcanism during the Tertiary Epoch. The semi-arid areas of the basins to the south of them are connected in a west-east direction by the Sahel belt. The region is a transition ecological zone - semi-arid grassland savannah, steppe - between the wetter savannah of the southern Sudan and the northern zonal desert of the descending air currents.

The interior regions of the Sahel zone - the basins

The Sahel belt connects - forms part of its territory - the larger sedimentary basins of northern Africa, separated by the higher landforms of tropical island troughs. From west to east, the following four basins are part of the belt: the Senegal, Niger, Chad and Upper Nile basins.

The Senegal Basin is essentially the catchment area of the Senegal River, although it is closely linked to the Gambia River and is therefore often referred to as the Senegal River Basin. The West African sedimentary basin provides a maritime link to the Sahel. It covers about 2% of the African continent, 483 181 km² in total, shared by four states (Guinea, Mali, Mauritania, Senegal). Each state shares a different proportion of the basin's area, so the share of the basin in relation to the whole varies. Near-surface aquifers are composed of Quaternary sediments in the Senegal Basin.

In places, submarine basalt is also present. Beneath the aquifers are limestone (karst) formations, underlain by late crustal (Maastrichtian) calcium-rich sandstones. The thickness of the stratigraphic assemblage reaches 250 m (Travi, 1993: 1-20, Frenken-Faurès, 1997:, IAEA 2017: 4-14, Madione-Mall-Diaw et al. 2018:, Taïbi-Kane-Bourlet et al. 2023: 79-113)

The basins that form the 'natural' geological/morphological part of the Sahelian belt were formed by the unevenly rapid (and age) subsidence of sedimentary rows (crustal slabs) deposited in different geological eras, such as the Taoudenni-Niger basin, which is 1 000 km in diameter and 150-300 m above sea level. The Niger, whose Saharan and Guinean stretches have only been connected in the last 50 000 years, descends into the basin through the raised morphological rim typical of the region (as do the Chari/Chari and Logone rivers that feed Lake Chad). The vast basin is one of the largest sedimentary strata covered geological-morphological formations in West Africa. It is based on the Precambrian rocks of the West African Craton. Its geosynclinal formation dates from the middle to late Proterozoic. The subsidence process continued until the Devonian (about 360 million years ago), interrupted by the Variscan/Cenozoic orogenic phase. The basin has stratigraphic assemblages dating from the late Precambrian to the Palaeozoic 6000 m thick. It is overlain by relatively shallow Mesozoic and Cenozoic continental sedimentary layers, and in some parts (Niger River valley) by Holocene alluvium (Oliver-Crowder, 1984: 36, Frenken-Faurès, 1997:, Gábris 2002: 9-10, Andersen-Dione-Jarosewich-Holder-Olivry, 2005: 11-30, Gábris 2010: 1252, IAEA 2017:, Miletics, 2024: 11-14.).

The area east of the geosyncline is covered by sandstones of different ages. The strata form a landscape with a gradual plateau-like morphology towards the sedimentary basin of Lake Chad, once a major internal water-covered lake of varying extent (so-called Paleo-Chad or Mega-Chad). The geological structure of the morphological unit is predominantly based on Precambrian rock assemblages (massifs), shaped by active - but discontinuous - volcanism during the Devonian-Jurassic period. In the Upper Cretaceous period (100.5-94 million years ago), these were overlain by marine transgression geological sequences. The sedimentary sequences contain coloured ore minerals. Lake Chad was once the largest natural freshwater reservoir in Africa, but has lost 95% of its surface area due to severe droughts and increasing ecological pressures from human activity. In geomorphological terms, the impervious standing water is located in a basin covering an area of about 2.5 million km². The lake is seasonally fed by rivers carrying rainfall from the southern Adamawa Plateau. The lake's water level is lowest in June-July and highest in November-December and its temperature also varies seasonally. The Komadugu-Yobe River feeds the lake in the sediment basin on the Niger-Nigeria border (its share is quite small, around 2.5%) (International Atomic Energy Agency,

nd.; Balek, 1977: 91, Cordell, 1988: 36, Hughes-Hughes, 1992: 327, Papp-Váry, 2001: 110-112, IUCN 2011.; Genthon-Hector-Luxereau et al 2015: 1291-1302, Hassoumi, 2017.; Rücki, 2018.; Pham-Duc-Sylvestre-Papa, et al 2020.; Adeyeri-Laux-Lawin-Ige-Kunstmann, 2020: 1339-1354, Lawal-Omosanya, 2022: 20-22, Rivers Network 2023.;, FAO 2023.;, Gritzner, 2023.;, Jedwab-Haslop-Zarate-David-Rodríguez-Castelán, 2023.;).⁴

The Chad Basin is an internal land-locked sediment-covered (slab-sedimentary) basin, shared by four states (Chad Nigeria, Niger and Cameroon). The Phanerozoic geological basin is smaller than the basin, formed at the same time as the opening of the South Atlantic basin. It is located between the West African and Congo cratons and formed in a similar way to the Benue Trench. It covers an area of about 2 335 000 km², with over 3 600 m of sediment deposited on Precambrian bedrock. Parts of the basin were occasionally affected by marine transgression, as indicated by sedimentary sequences from the Late Cretaceous (100,5-66 million years), which are of considerable thickness in a north-easterly direction. In the western part of the Chad Basin, the Turonian geological epoch (93.5-89.3 million years ago) was characterised by regression. During the Cretaceous Maastrichtian (72,1-66 million years ago), marine sedimentation was restricted to the southeast. In the Palaeocene Epoch (66-56 million years), there are no marine sediments. From the Pleistocene (2,6 million years ago) to the Holocene, the basin was a wetland, but with the drying of the climate around 40 000-20 000 years ago, desert sand dunes developed in the northern part of the basin. Around 11 000 years ago, following the last glaciation phase, the huge mega-catchment filled the sedimentary basin, which was connected to the Atlantic Ocean via the Benue River. The basin covers almost 8% of Africa and covers an area of about 2 434 000 km². Its natural - physical geographical - boundaries are the Aïr Mountains and the Termit Massif in the west, the Tassili n'Ajjer Mountains in the north-west, the Tibesti Mountains in the north, the Ennedi Plateau in the north-east, the Ouaddaï and Marrah Mountains (Darfur) in the east, and the Adamawa, Jos, Biu and Mandara Mountains (bordering 8 states) in the south. Its lowest part is the Bodélé depression, 480 km northeast of Lake Chad (Higson, 1964: 3, Burke, 1976: 197-206, Wright, 1985: 94-97, Frenken-Faurès, 1997.;, Kenmore, 2004: 13-29.).

The most easterly geomorphologic component of the intracontinental geosynclines connected by the Sahel belt is the Upper Nile Basin, the drainage basin of the White Nile and its tributaries. In total, the basin covers about 2 870 000 km², representing almost 10% of the African continent. The basin connects Burundi, Chad,

⁴ The present lake was much more extensive in the first half of the Holocene, due to climatic, and more specifically regional, rainfall patterns.

the Democratic Republic of Congo, Egypt, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Rwanda, South Sudan, Sudan, Tanzania, Uganda, and Ethiopia, about 20% of Africa's population. In the south-western part of the basin, in South Sudan, near the Congo Basin watershed, there is a large flat plateau (pediplain) formed by the gradual coalescence of mountain plateaus. Rising above the surface, the plateaus are covered with laterites that contain the remains of an older landform. The geosynclinal bedrock is composed of crystalline igneous and metamorphic rocks of Precambrian age, but mainly in the upper part of the basin. The bedrock is practically impermeable, with natural reservoirs only forming in areas with eroded blanket and intense fracturing features. The upper and middle catchment areas form the Bahr el Ghazal system. Fissure subsidence during the Cretaceous period shaped the topography of the lower parts of the Sudd, the Muglad Rift Basin and Bahr el Ghazal. The lower parts of the basin are characterised by the predominance of Tertiary and Quaternary sedimentary deposits, which are varied, ranging from low permeability mudstones and shales to higher permeability sandstones and limestones. The latter form the most productive aquifers. The highly diverse igneous rocks occur in the mountainous areas - Ethiopian highlands - and form fertile aquifers. The ecoregion that defines the Sahel is mainly found in the northern Upper Nile Basin (the South Sudan-Sudan border and the area north of it, which extends into Ethiopia and Eritrea) (Frenken-Faurès, 1997.; Sutcliffe-Parks, 1999.; MacAlister-Pavelic-Tindimugaya et al. 2012:186-191, Akol-Galla-Wanyonyi et al. 2016: 23-29, Woodward-Macklin-Krom-Williams, 2022: 261-292.).

Climatic and ecological characteristics of Sahel

The Sahel is a geographical territory defined mainly by climatic and ecological characteristics. Its ecosystem is highly exposed, and rainfall is of particular importance in the region. Its topographic and morphological character is characterised by its flatness, with the greater part of the Sahel having an altitude of between 200 and 400 m above sea level. The areas of isolated plateaus, tropical island mountains (clumps) are classified in other ecological regions. At the same time, their flora and fauna are different from the flora and fauna of the semi-arid plains. The region's varied topography is made up of a series of mountains, plateaus and depressions, the latter being river basins. The geological structure of the geographic-ecological region is complex: rocks from the early part of the Earth's history (e.g. Tagant, Assaba, Afollé, central and eastern Sudan), sedimentary mesozoic assemblages (Ténéré, Nubian sandstone formation-Western Sudan), Tertiary and Quaternary terrestrial and lake sediments (Grove, 1978: 407-415, Vuics 1987: 25-38, OSS (Sahara and Sahel Observatory) 2019: 7-14, Naia-Brito, 2021: 81-100, UNISS 2024:.).

The climate of the Sahel is tropical, with the average annual rainfall varying according to the geographical situation: duration and volume increase from north to south. The zonal precipitation pattern, due to the summer northerly shift of the zonal

rainfall band, is characterised by a single rainy season from May to October, with a maximum from June to September. Average annual rainfall is over 800 mm in the south and less than 200 mm in the north. This determines the quality of the natural vegetation and the spatial patterns of agriculture and nomadic livestock farming. The long dry season of 6-9 months and the rainy season are characteristic of the dynamics of the Inetertropical Convergence Zone (ITCZ) movement. The climate has influenced the morphology of the region. The vegetation cover of the Sahel is relatively continuous, and the soil development processes in the region, which has a tropical semi-arid climate, are essentially determined by the sedimentary deposits of the Late Quaternary. The area is dominated by the savannah ecoregion of the Sahelian Acacia savannah, with average maximum temperatures in the warmest month ranging from 31 °C to 45 °C and average minimum temperatures in the coldest month of around 20 °C. Annual temperature variation ranges from an average of 28 °C to 15 °C, with hot and dry winds from the Sahara (north) in winter (Harmattan) often transporting dust and sand particles (Martin-Burgess, nd, Magnin, nd.; White, 1983: 203-215,

Péczy 1986: 404-405, Linder-de Klerk-Born et al 2012: 1189-1205, Brito-Tarros- Cândida-Vale et al 2016: 371-384, Biasutti, 2019.; Holmes-Brook-Daoust et al 2022: 67-70,)

The ecological and climatic problems in the Sahel are due to a number of factors, which are interlinked and exacerbating the situation by upsetting the balance that had previously existed. In a zone of high exposure - vulnerable or sensitive - ecological stability, the disruption of the dynamic balance shaped by climate, the biological ecosystem, the geographic-morphological elements and the socio-economic activity of the population living there can generate critical consequences (livelihood or eco-migration, increase in the rates of political violence) that go beyond the limits of the description of the region in terms of natural geography. Perhaps the most important of the pre-existing factors that have ensured the region's dynamic eco-geographic-climatic balance - which of course broke down several times in some previous historical periods - is the system of climatic relations. In this context, the dynamics of climate variability should be emphasised more than the concept of climate change. This has resulted in a reduction in the intensity of the West African monsoon and a shortening and intensification of the rainy season, with a reduction in the average rainfall, and a greater frequency of droughts. This process can be specifically linked to the increase in anthropogenic pollution in the atmosphere and its negative effects on habitats in the wind. The relative stability of the Sahel has been negatively affected by certain adverse social processes (deforestation, overgrazing, agriculture, water management, the status of the demographic curve, socio-economic instability). The complex challenges affecting local ecosystems are historically recurrent phenomena in the landscape chronology of the Sahel, as evidenced by sedimentary

and historical sources. Anomalies in precipitation and climate patterns are relatively common climatic challenges in the region, as supported by complex architectural analysis or modelling relationships of atmospheric-oceanic features. Climate models project the development of a Sahel zone of increasing aridity in the near future, mainly due to anthropogenic forcing. It is therefore not surprising that paleo-climatological research on the African continent shows that the northern boundary of the Sahel - the largest known extension of the zonal desert zone - has been at 10°N in some of the driest periods, where the southern boundary of the region, defined by the 800 (1000) mm isohyet line⁵, is now commonly defined in the literature. Today, this dividing line is further north, around 20°N, but in general the Sahel is characterised by variable rainfall patterns, with decreasing annual average rainfall and increasing and fluctuating variability and temporal distribution of rainfall. As a consequence of this process, external forces, mainly water and wind erosion, will continue to be the main surface-forming factors in the region, will continue to be the main factors shaping the geomorphological landscape. In the face of these self-propagating processes, which are unfortunately accelerating, exacerbated by poor patterns of socio-economic activity, it is necessary to develop and consistently implement an effective regional strategy for regenerating and maintaining ecosystem conditions. This could be the key to the environmental sustainability of the Sahel, a fragile, highly exposed and typically transitional zone, as a climate and ecological zone ((Magnin, é.n.; Martin-Burgess, nd.; Udvardy, 1975: 25-27, Swift, 1977: 457-478, White, 1983: 203-215, National Research Council. 1983.; Timberlake, 1985: 17-19, Butzer, 1986: 468-477, 500, Milich, 1997.; Burton, 1998: 1-4, Agnew-Chappell, 1999: 299-311, Vojnits, 2000: 74-79, Batterbury-Warren, 2001: 1-8, UNEP, 2002: 158, 218-219, 276, Giannini-Saravanan-Chang, 2003: 1027-1030, Dai-Lamb-Trenberth et al 2004: 1323-1331, Held-Delworth-Lu, 2005: 17891-17896, Jackson School of Geosciences, 2009.; Shanahan-Overpeck-Anchukaitis, 2009: 377-380, Rodríguez-Fonseca-Mohino-Mechoso, 2019: 4030-4060, WeAreWater, 2019.; Ndehedehe-Agutu-Ferreira-Getirana, 2019.; Biasutti, 2019.;).

Overall, the natural geographic boundaries of the Sahel are not clear and are difficult to define. In addition to the physical geographic and morphological characteristics, this requires a strong consideration of the ecological and biogeographical features, which reflect the complexity of the Sahel.

Conclusion

The Sahel region, which forms a diverse environmental unit, presents significant challenges both for the states of the region and for external power actors seeking to assert their geopolitical interests in the area.

⁵ Isohyet: a line connecting geographical points with the same amount of precipitation in a given period.

In the semi-arid climate region, the periodically extreme increase in the aridity index indicates changes in the dynamics of climate variability. Due to the intensification of climatic extremes, the water supply of semi-arid areas becomes difficult to predict, increasing the climatological exposure and vulnerability of the region's states.

Desertification, climate change, and the depletion of natural resources exacerbate food and water shortages, posing a constant challenge for the local population. The scarcity of resources, or more precisely, their distribution, often generates local conflicts, particularly between two traditionally economic communities: nomadic pastoralists and sedentary farmers. The geographical root of the tension between these two distinct geo-cultural communities lies in the shrinking areas of the Sahel—diminished as a consequence of adverse climatic processes—that are suitable for sustaining both economic activities and lifestyles. This conflict zone further exacerbates the region's instability.

This partly explains the inherently unstable security situation in the Sahel region, which is further exacerbated by the fragility of local political entities, nepotism, corruption, and the tribal fragmentation of societies. Due to the region's unique geographical characteristics, the permeability and lack of control over interstate borders (resulting from insufficient state sovereignty) create opportunities for various armed groups and militant terrorist organizations, such as local branches of al-Qaeda and the DAESH. Extremist groups exploit the grievances of local communities and the weaknesses of governance to strengthen their influence in remote areas far from centers of power, using the peripheries of state territories as power bases to launch attacks.

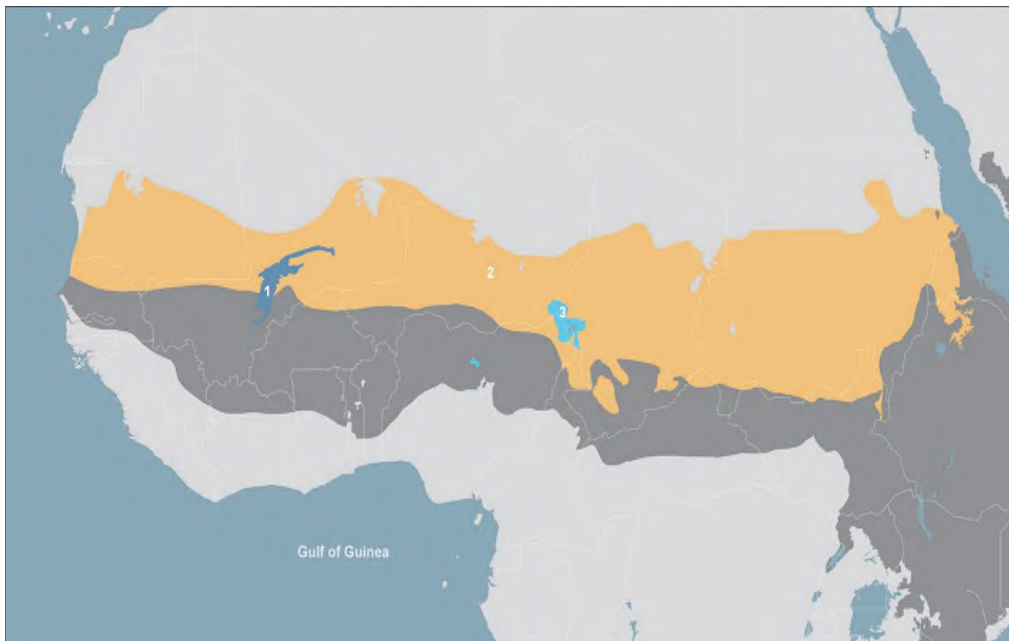
The international community and its organizations/institutions have previously launched numerous regional peacekeeping operations and stabilization programs, which have been hindered by the deteriorating security situation and the expanding operational reach of militant radical groups. However, past operations, along with the military presence of France and other international partners, have not resolved the underlying issues; rather, they have demonstrated that addressing the situation poses a significant geopolitical challenge.

Geographical and environmental characteristics have a direct impact on political and security conditions, as well as on operations aimed at dismantling the complex network of armed conflicts. This necessitates a long-term international commitment to developing sustainable solutions, a key component of which is the establishment and maintenance of specialized operational forces capable of adapting to the geographical environment. Additionally, a credible support system tailored to the unique morphological and climatic conditions of the Sahel must be ensured, as these elements collectively contribute to regional stability.

In this context, addressing the current alarming humanitarian situation is also imperative, particularly in managing both external and internal migration pressures caused by armed conflicts and the climate crisis. The first prerequisite for this is ensuring the safe delivery of humanitarian aid and international relief efforts to those in need.

The Sahel is characterized by the close interconnections between its geographical-environmental features and its political and security situation. At the same time, it remains questionable whether the emerging Russian geopolitical presence—seemingly replacing previous Western influence—can effectively address even certain elements of the region’s complex challenges, develop sustainable solutions, or if it is merely driven by imperial interests.

The Sahel-region



Source: <https://www.oneearth.org/bioregions/sahel-acacia-savannas-at23/>

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PART I: REGIONAL OVERVIEW

CHAPTER 2

History of the Sahel

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Abstract

In the first part of this chapter, the most important historical empires are presented. In several cases geographical terminologies mean something completely or partially different today and in the course of the ancient and Middle Ages (e.g. Mauritania, Mali, Ghana). An important element of this period is the Islamization of some parts of the region, the meeting of Islam with the animist, black African cultures, the struggle for the control of the trade routes, and the beginning of the struggle for territories between the transhumant herders and the agricultural ethnicities. Getting to know the 'imperial past' is also important because this sometimes plays a significant role in the political discourse and goals and federal aspirations of contemporary states. On the other hand, it is also essential for understanding one of the key problems of today, the goals of the Tuareg population, which are also rooted in the past.

This is followed in the next part by the European penetration into the region, the colonization process, and as a result of the decolonization wave of the 1960s, the formation of the states of the region as they are known today. Regarding the present, the chapter deals in detail with the destabilizing effects of the embarrassment of Libya in the region, with the rise of the Tuaregs and the domino-like collapse of state systems, which went 'hand in hand' with the dynamic spread of international terrorism. In addition, the region examined by the chapter also fully covers the G5 Sahel initiative and the new Alliance of Sahel States (ASS).

Keywords: Sanhadja, Ghana Empire, Mali Empire, Tuareg rebellions, Fula revolutions, colonialism

We consider Africa to be the cradle of humanity, because according to the current point of view of science, the various proto-humans, from *Austraopithecus* to *Homo sapiens*, all developed one after the other in Africa and spread from there (the

so-called 'African basic' theory). In ancient times, the question of the relationship between North Africa and the Sahara was still highly debated. It has been suggested that there were active trade routes from the beginning of the first millennium BC. Many rock faces in the Sahara have engravings of horse-drawn chariots and their spatial distribution suggests 'roads' crossing the desert. But apart from the fact that neither horses nor chariots could have crossed certain sand ergs, no remains of such a means of transport have ever been found. However, it is possible that the pictorial motif seen in North Africa was transposed throughout the Sahara. What can archaeology prove so far? Based on excavations of burial sites in the Sahel, we can say that trade between the two sides of the desert, in its western part, was in place around the 4th or 5th century AD. and the Sahara already connected North Africa and the Sahel before the 7th century.

Since antiquity the three major Berber confederations were Sanhadja, Masmuda (Morocco) and Zenata (North-Africa). During the Roman period, the Sanhadja tribes controlled the Atlantic part of the Sahel. The ancestors of the Sanhadja constituted under the High Roman Empire a Moorish tribe of Djebel Titteri (Nantet, 2013:62; Besenyő, 2022: 14-18). They are the result of this fusion between Amazigh pastoralism from the Atlas regions and the autonomous communities, concentrated in the oases, which are their tributaries. In the 4th or 5th century AD the Garamantes, descended from an ethnic group native to the Tibesti Mountains, the Berber (Tubu) tribes and Saharan pastoralists inhabitants of Fezzan (Libya), maintained trade with Mediterranean Africa and perhaps contributed to the development of trade towards the south. At the same time from the historical region *Sijilmasa* (Talifat in Maroc) came another nomad Berber ethnic group, the Targa branch of Sanhadja, the Tuareg, who previously inhabited in the central Sahara massifs, moved southward into the Sahel under the reign of the Tuareg founding queen, Tin Hinan (Queen of the Hoggar). The commercial caravans that passed from the Niger loop to the northern Sahara, notably from Ouargla (Algeria) and Djebel Nefoussa (Libya), were protected by them. The Tuaregs, who call themselves the *Ke/Tamajeq*, are divided into several confederations and tribes. These peoples are located in the central Sahara and its borders (Algeria, Libya, Niger, Mali, Mauritania, Chad, and the far north of Burkina Faso) and speak a Berber language called Tamajeq. (Monès, 1990: 255)

The appearance of Islam is also a key factor in the history of the Sahel. The Arab conquest of North Africa was completed in 698. On the one hand, Islamic religion and Islamic laws (Sharia) become dominant in the Maghreb region. On the other hand, the Arab commercial culture built a professional commercial network by further developing the existing foundations of trade. At the time of the spread of Islam in the Sahel there were a myriad of kingdoms and city-states competing to accommodate

the caravans: Around 700 AD in the 'middle-area' between North-Africa and the Sahel, the Berber tribes organized themselves into the Sanhadja confederation: In the North, their main northern trading centers were Sijilmasa (Morocco) and Ouargla, and in South Awdaghust and Tadmekka were the first major caravan termini in the Sahel (Fage, – Tordoff, 2005: 64).

Sanhadja tribes had a great influence on the history of Mauritania, Morocco, Algeria and even Spain. Among Sanhadja tribes, the most important were the following: the Djoddala (Gudâla) tribe occupied the southwestern part of the Sahara and the northern part of Senegal; the Lamtuna tribe (originating from the Adrar mountains) originates from the center of present-day Algeria and colonized Senegal and southern Morocco; and the Messufa tribe was present in the area between Upper Niger and Senegal. Around 800, a new Sanhadja confederation was created, the purpose of which was to control the trans-Saharan trade and to compete with the pagan kingdoms of the Sahel. But this unity remained very fragile. After the arrival of Islam, the Sanhaja spread out to the borders of the Sudan as far as the Senegal River and the Niger (Levtzion, 2008: 651-664).

With the arrival of the Arabs to the north of the Sahara, large oasis cities, sovereign or in the orbit of neighboring powers, were founded, marking the rise of the great trans-Saharan trade. New roads were opened towards the south, in particular to prospect for gold, thus the little-known space extending south of the Sahara, the Sahel and in particular *Bilâd al-Sûdân* (country of the Blacks), became the world's first Eldorado. The adoption of Islam in the Sahel, firstly by the merchant communities, was therefore an important factor in the intensification of trans-Saharan trade, because it offered a new framework for promoting trust between linguistically different groups, ultimately integrating it after the adoption of Islam by the royal powers and the elites in the 11th century. But the majority of the Berber population did not convert to Islam and retained their old animist religion. Muslims were a minority in West Africa until the 20th century and kings who converted to Islam still had to perform local religious rites in order to gain the loyalty of their subjects (Fauvelle, 2019: 19).

The most important Sudanese kingdoms in the Sahel during this period were Takrûr (in modern day: Mauritania and Northern Senegal) Ghâna (southeast Mauritania and western Mali), Gao (Mali) and Kanem (Chad). Ghana, the "land of gold", became the most important, linking Awdaghust with Tahert (Algeria) and Sijilmasa in north Africa following the introduction of the camel to the western Sahel in the 3rd century AD and was, therefore, the first to benefit from the introduction of pack animals by Wolof traders. Takrur held a dominant position in regional trade, controlling a series of trading posts and cities linking the salt mines of Awlil (Wouli) on the coast north of the mouth of the Senegal to the interior (Gomez, 2018: 37). The route linking

Zawīla (southwestern Libya) to the kingdom of Kanem is also known early as a slave route.

Internal conflicts between the Lamtuna, Godala and Masufa tribes divided the Sanhadja confederation, they were gradually pushed back, and Awdaghus was occupied by the Ghana Empire by the end of the 10th century. In 1040 the Lamtuna tribes united under the rule of Abû Bakr Ibn Umar, an ambitious tribal chief who recognized that Islam could help unite the sanhadja tribes and therefore allied with Ibn Yasîn, founder of a *ribât* (military monastery) on the island of Tidra (Mauritania). A tribal confederation and then an empire, led by the Almoravid (*people of the ribât*) dynasty encompassed Morocco, as well as Western Sahara, Mauritania, part of modern Mali and western Algeria, as well as the southern Iberian Peninsula (1081) (Fage – Tordoff, 2004: 64; Murray, 2003: 48; Besenyő, 2020, 14-18).

From the 1050s, the Almoravid conquests would strengthen the weight of *Sijilmasa* as the main departure point in the south of the Maghreb towards the Sahel and Awdaghus declines definitively. A more central route into Ghana was the most traveled, through Tegahza, located in the middle of the Sahara, where rock salt is mined in open-cast mines, and ends at Kumbi, a commercial town (perhaps the capital of the Kingdom of Ghana) (Fauvelle - Surun, 2019: 18). In 1147 the capture of Marrakech by the Almohads (al-Muwahhîdun, "which proclaims divine unity" 1147-1269) marked the beginning of the fall of the Almoravids. The Almohads unified the Maghreb in 1163 under the Sufi preacher and founder of the Almohad state, Ibn Tûmert.. Yet, in an empire built on tribes, no kind of 'national identity' developed in this region like in the European states of the era.

In 1230 Sundiata Keita established the Mali Empire (1230-1545). By the end of the 13th century, the Mali Empire extended over that part of Mauritania previously controlled by Ghana, as well as other regions of the Sahel and the Senegal River Valley. Sundiata and his successors took over Ghana's role in the Saharan trade and in the administration and collection of tribute from vast areas of Sudan and the Sahel. Under the reign of *mansa* (king) K. Musa (c. 1312- c.1337), the south-east of present-day Mauritania was incorporated into the empire. The conquest of the kingdom of Gao, which controlled eastern trade, in 1325 was of vital importance to the Mali Empire. Mali became the largest empire in West Africa (c. 1.100.000 km² in 1380) widely influencing the culture of the region through the spread of its language, laws, and customs. By this time, the western Sudanese territories of the Almoravids had already been deserted, and instead of the old western trade routes (Awdaghus), the traders used the central routes leading to the middle bend of the Niger, with two new destinations flourishing in the territory of the Mali Empire, Gao and Timbuktu. Timbuktu was a major center of Islamic scholarship and learning, and became home to many universities and madrasas (Hill, 2003). When the Mali Empire seized the western

Sahelian coast in the mid-13th century, it made Oualata the gateway to its sultanate and arranged for the caravans passing through it to converge towards its capital. The Sijilmasa-Teghaza-Oualata-Mali axis experienced a final peak before declining from the 1390s, when the Touat oases (Algeria) established themselves as the new caravan centre of the northern Sahara (Lugan, 2009: 200-217; Fage – Tordoff 2004: 67-70; Davidson, 1985: 46-54). During this time, the Portuguese intervention began with the capture of Ceuta in Morocco in 1415. The importance of the European irruption on the African scene is often exaggerated; the Portuguese were only inserting themselves into economic dynamics that were already deployed on a vast scale. Having brought down the Mamluk Empire in 1517, the Ottoman Empire (until 1574) established three provinces in North Africa during the 16th century (present-day Algeria, Tunisia and Libya). It changed also the political maps in the Sahara and provoked a reaction from Morocco and Borno, at the expense of the Ottomans and Songhai (Fauvelle – Surun, 2019: 22-23., 30-33).

To the West the Songhai Empire (1430-1591) was the successor of the Gao kingdom (Stride - Ifeka, 1971: 54-55). Sonni Ali (1464-1492) attacked Méma, the Mali province west of Timbuktu and succeeded in shaking off Malian authority. The kingdom supplanted the Mali Empire and extended to Mauritania and the valley of the Senegal River (from Dakar to Niamey, Niger). Sonni acted as the leader of the local 'infidels' and moved against the Muslim theologians (Fage – Tordoff, 2004: 71; Davidson, 1985: 68-85.; Lugan, 2009: 236-239). The Gao-Timbuktu empire reached its peak under his successor Muhammad Turé, also took control of the salt mines in Taghaza (Nord-Mali) near the Moroccan border. Then sank into crisis and collapsed due to the military intervention of the Moroccan Sultan Ahmed al-Mansur (Saadi Dynasty). 4,000 battle-trained soldiers with guns and 8000 camels, under the command of Djouder and after a 1,600-kilometer desert march won the battle of Tondibi (1591) (Levtzion, 2008: 414. and 442). The Gao, outnumbered by twenty, first saw firearms, the sound of which caused alarm among them. The significance of this battle is that it ended seven decades of Western Sudanese (and partly Mauritanian) rule based on strong, centralized black kingdoms in the Sahel region. The Moroccan Moulay Zaydan (1603-1628), in addition to the title of Caliph, also took the title of "king of the Sudanese cities". But the conquerors, despite later receiving 20,000 reinforcements, were unable to establish themselves for a long time and were only able to control three cities: Timbuktu, Gao, and Djenne. They were decimated by unknown diseases and the gold trade in the region was disrupted. Gao was finally captured by the Tuaregs in 1770 followed by Timbuktu in 1787 (Fage – Tordoff, 2004: 156-157).

To the East, in the Lake Chad region, the Kingdom of Bornu reconquered Kanem during the 16th century and became Kanem-Bornu Empire (1380-1893) including today's north-eastern Nigeria (Borno) and parts of Chad, Niger and

Cameroon. Kanem and Songhay did not have direct relations with each other. The Hausa emirates, in the north of what is now Nigeria, acted as buffer zones, drawing on the influences of their two neighbors. In the 17th and 18th centuries, the commercial axis between Borno and Tripoli, revived the vigor of trans-Saharan trade, while the Ottoman fleet dethroned Portuguese power in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. In the 18th century, the most important Saharan trade route ran from Tunisia and Tripoli to the Hausa states and the Chad River (Dewière, 2017).

The 19th century in the Sahel was the century of the so-called Fula (or Fulani) revolution (a revolution launched mainly by the Fula, Tukolor and Hausa clerical class; sometimes called also "Fula conflicts"). During this period, two major empires emerged among numerous smaller states, the Tukolor Empire in the mid-west and the Songhay Empire in the east, with the Macina Caliphate in between and the now famous Kanem-Borno Sultanate in the east (until 1893.) In the early 19th century, the revolution movement spread eastward to the Hausa states. This era was brought to an end by European colonialism at the turn of the 20th century.

How did the holy wars of revolution differ from earlier wars of conquest? Although the Almoravids could already be interpreted as a holy war when they conquered the kingdom of Ghana, the first difference is that the holy war of the revolution was that it was essentially an internal revolution. It was launched by locals (West Africans) and not by peoples who had arrived from other regions. The reason was to protest against the ruling class's treatment of Muslims and other minorities (Ajayi, 1996: 23-46). The first Fula revolutions began in the smaller states of Futa Toro (Senegal) and Futa Jallon (Guinea), beginning in the late 17th century. Futa Toro is the territory of the former kingdom of Takrur, from which the cattle-herding Fulbe people originate. In Futa Jallon, the Fulbe settled among the village communities had to pay increasing taxes while having no political rights. There is nothing new in this compared to previous changes of power in that the organization and direction of the resistance began with religious teachers and leaders and their military allies. One of the main objectives of Fula revolution was to purify Islam and to establish Sharia law in the conquered territories. The main expansion took place at the expense of Ségou and Karta, the kingdoms of the animist Bambaras (Lugan, 2009: 431). This also meant the end of religious tolerance: Previously, it was enough for the ruler to follow the Islamic religion only nominally, and at the same time, due to folk traditions and legitimacy, he could also maintain the animist rites. While broad layers of society did not or hardly convert to Islam, perhaps even among them, duality existed. (The rulers of states generally also did not support mass conversions because of the tax on infidels.)

Islam had penetrated the Hausa regions (Northern Niger, mainly populated by Hausa and Fulani societies) from the 14th century through traders from neighboring

Borno or regions north of the Sahara. Pre-Islamic religions survived, but Islamic culture, carried by books spread across the Sahara or written by the caliph's family, penetrated the entire region. In this area the result of a Peul revolution in the land of the Hausas led by Ousmane dan Fodio between 1804 and 1810 the Sokoto Caliphate (1804-1903⁶) became the largest state in Africa in the 19th century, covering mainly the north of present-day Nigeria and north of Cameroon. Fodio was the apprentice of the Arab Muslim fraternity Qadiriya with Sunni Hanbalite inspiration. This movement revolutionized all societies in the region, the aim was to reform or even revolutionize the societies of the conquered regions. However, Sokoto's centralizing desires over the rest of the caliphate were limited by the pre-revolution structures of the Hausa cities, but also by the impossibility of reaching large parts of the rural population. The economy of the caliphate was based on a servile economy fueled by wars or raids. Thus, work in the salt mines of the north was carried out by slaves, as was work in the iron or leather industries and the cotton or indigo plantations of the central regions.

The Sokoto Caliphate was integrated into the Northern Nigeria Protectorate in 1903 as a result of a brief British military campaign. The British made it the model for their policy of Indirect Rule (Fauvelle - Surun, 2019: 54; Last, 1996: 599-647; Lugan 2009: 437. Fage - Tordoff, 2004: 174-178; Mayer, 2024: 317-352). Between Sokoto and Tukolor area the Masina Caliphate⁷ was founded by Seku Ahmadu in 1818, after defeating the numerically superior army of the Bambara Empire (1712-1861) one of the most important successors of the Songhai Empire, and its allies at the battle of Noukouma (1818, Mali). By 1853, the empire had fallen into decline and was ultimately conquered by Omar Tall. (Sanankoua, 1990: 45-46). The Tukolor Empire (1848/1852-1893, today Mali and Senegal) (Robinson, 1988: 317) was founded by Omar Tall from Futa-Toro, member of the sufi Tijjani order. They are mainly Fulani (Peul) the empire covered the current territory of Guinea, Senegal and Mali (Fage – Tordoff, 2004: 76-78). Tall acquired a reputation as a saint and gathered many disciples who would form the cadres of his army. It was around 1848 that he prepared the revolution in Dinguiraye (Guinea) (Lugan, 2009: 438-440). His army, equipped with European light weapons received from the British in Sierra Leone, attacked several Malinke countries and Upper Senegal possessions from 1850. In 1856 he annexed the Bambara kingdoms of Kaarta in 1856 and of Segu in 1861, after the battle of Ngano. Then he refocused his country in the Niger Valley because of the French occupation in Senegal (Ly-Tall, 1996: 647-682).

The French West-East colonialist aspirations that intensified in the 1880s, along the Niger River, including acquiring the central area of the Lake Chad, came into conflict the efforts of the British North-South colonialist aspirations (Cairo-Khartoum-

⁶ The term 'caliphate' was not used until the 20th century.

⁷ Dina or Massina Empire, Caliphate of Hamdullahi

Cape Town) at Fashoda in 1898 (Kodok, South-Sudan). French were forced to retreat (Fage – Tordoff, 2004: 294-295; Lugan, 2009: 551-607, 521-550). In 1895 French West Africa (*Afrique-Occidentale française*; AOF) was created, like a federation grouping 8 colonies. Formed in several stages, it eventually brought together Senegal, Guinea, Ivory Coast, Upper Volta (which became Burkina Faso), Dahomey (Benin), Mauritania, French Sudan (Mali), Niger, and nearly 25 million people at the time of its dissolution. The objective of the AOF was to coordinate under a single authority the French colonial penetration of the African continent. Its capital was in Senegal, Saint-Louis then Dakar (1902-1960). The second large administrative bloc in Africa created by the French was the French Equatorial Africa (*Afrique-Équatoriale française*; AEF 1910-1958), which also included the Central African states outside the Sahel region. The AEF was also a federation, a general government grouping together within the same federation of four colonies of Central Africa between 1910-1958: Oubangui-Chari (future CAR), Chad, Middle Congo (Republic of the Congo, Congo-Brazzaville), and Gabon (Lugan, 2009: 607., Türke, 2018: 4). During the First World War, the myth of the 'white man's invincibility' was essentially lost in all of Africa, and the African partners watched with incomprehension as the colonial powers turned against each other and they now fought in alliance with them. France and Great Britain ultimately acquired the German colonies. In the Sahel the Volta-Bani War (Bona Kele, 1915-16) was a colonial war in the Bani-Volta region of Upper Volta between insurgents and French colonial troops. UThe participation of colonial soldiers in the Second World War was even more important, between 1943 and 1945 more than half a million Africans were mobilized and sent to fight. AOF was not the scene of major fighting, the only one major action was the Battle of Dakar (23-25 September 1940). The French Congo, the only colony of AEF, did not join to *France libre*, after the armistice but fell into the hands of general De Gaulle's forces after the Gabon campaign (8–12 November 1940), further isolating AOF. In 1946, France slightly transformed its relationship with its former colonies, creating the French Union of the Fourth Republic, which was reorganized in 1958 by the Fifth Republic to the French Community. The African partners were disappointed in both, and the latter's efforts to integrate soon became futile in the wake of the decolonization wave starting in 1960.

Mauritania, a former French colony became autonomous in 1958. The Islamic Republic had proclaimed independence on November 28, 1960 and the new constitution established a presidential regime. The Beidan, or 'White Moors' held political, economic and military power. Moktar Ould Daddah was the country's first president, re-elected several times between 1960-1978. On November 14, 1975 the country signed an agreement with the Spain and Morocco over Western Sahara, the territory of which is shared between Morocco (2/3) and Mauritania (1/3). But the following month the conflict began with the Polisario Front over the sovereignty of Western Sahara, Tiris al-Ġarbiyya was the name of the territory under Mauritanian

control (1975-1979) with the capital in Dakhla. Tiris Occidental was the lower half of the Río de Oro, the southern province of the former Spanish Sahara, comprising 88,000 km² with a population of 12,897 people. It consisted mainly of desert terrain, barely populated except by a few thousand Sahrawi nomads (Sahrawis), many of whom had fled to the Algerian province of Tindouf in 1975. The Polisario Front waged a guerrilla war against Morocco until 1991, after which a peace agreement was reached through UN mediation, but the conflict flared up again in November 2020. (Besenyő, 2017: 23-45) After several coup d'état, in April 1989 a violent racial clash between Mauritians and Senegalese began in both countries which resulted in the mass expulsions of black Africans to Senegal and Mauritians living in the other direction. The era of President Ould Taya (1992-2005), former Prime Minister and concomitantly Army Chief of Staff (1981-84), was characterized by the ambitious first steps towards democratization, (establishment of multiparty politics and freedom of the press in 1991⁸). Taya established close relations with Israel, which isolated him politically within the Arab League and in his own country. He *“appeared to have set Mauritania on the path to become the Arab world’s first democracy, an advance seized as proof of democracy’s viability in Arab and Islamic nations.”* (Foster, 2011: 1-3. and 30-33).⁹ But in 2005 Taya was overthrown and Mauritania was excluded from the African Union between 2005-2007. The anti-terrorist law adopted in 2010, under the presidency of Ould Abdel Aziz (2008-2019) allowed the authorities to muzzle several political opponents. However, the Chief of Staff and then Minister of Defense, Mohamed O. Ghazouani, implemented successful measures thanks to which Mauritania has not suffered a terrorist attack since 2011. The end of the third presidential period led to a conflict that had already been simmering, as the opposition fiercely opposed a plan to amend the constitution to remove the limit on the president's re-election. An agreement was reached, and Ghazouani came to power in 2019 as a result of democratic elections.¹⁰

In parallel with the independence aspirations of the former AOF countries, integration aspirations also emerged with the aim of ensuring the cooperation of the new young states. At the end of 1958, at the Bamako Conference, the representatives of Senegal (chaired by Léopold Sédar Senghor), French Sudan (future Sudanese Republic, Mahamane Haïdara), Upper Volta (future Burkina Faso, Maurice Yaméogo) and Dahomey (future Bénin, Alexandre Adandé) formulated the constitution of the Mali Federation (1959-60). In January 1959 Yaméogo changed his position: after having defended the Mali Federation, he now wanted his country to join the Community individually. This about-face was made under pressure from neighboring Ivory Coast.

⁸ From this year, Arabic is the country's sole official language, French is no longer the second official language.

⁹ Close cooperation with Israel existed until 2009

¹⁰ Mauritanie – CERPESC Dossier, [online] Available at: https://europavarietas.org/csdp/mauritanie_dossier (Accessed 20 March, 2024).

In Dahomey, the supporters of federalism failed and the country did not join the Federation. Thus Upper Volta and Dahomey withdrew, dissuaded by France and Ivory Coast, which created the *Conseil de l'Entente*, ("Council of Accord", 1959-) with them, and only Senegal and French Sudan joined the Mali Federation.

After Senegal's withdrawal in 1960, **Modibo Keita** proclaimed the independence of French Sudan, which became the Republic of Mali. Relations with France became tense, and French troops left the country in September 1961. Keita introduced socialism and Mali joined the group of non-aligned countries. In July 1962 Mali decided to leave the West African Monetary Union (UMOA), creating new tensions between Paris and Bamako. The government created the Malian Franc, which replaced the CFA franc (Türke, 2018: 16-17). The country's economy quickly collapsed and the "first Tuareg rebellion" (1962-63) was very harshly repressed by the Malian army. The movement was also greatly weakened by the droughts of the 1970s. In 1968, Moussa Traoré overthrew Keita and became president of the country until 1991. In 1974 under the "Second Republic", the new constitution introduced the presidential system, but the central power remained dictatorial and centralized. The country's gradual democratization only began in the 1990s under the presidency of Alpha Oumar Konaré (1992-2002). Mali became one of Africa's model countries, combining elements of a functioning democracy and economic reforms (Fage – Tordoff, 2004: 421).¹¹ Between 2002-2012 under the presidency of Amadou Toumani Touré (ATT), commercial, political and cultural relations with France slowed down while those with China, the Arabian Peninsula and the United States strengthened.

Formerly a colonial center of French West Africa, Senegal became independent as a member of the Mali Federation and remained under strong French influence. The country was led from 1960 to 1980 by the poet and writer Léopold Sédar Senghor, also known as the founding father of Francophonie. In the 1980s, a process of liberalization and democratization began, and between 1982 and 1987 a confederation with Gambia, known as the historical Sengambia, was established - although foreign affairs were shared. President Abdou Diouf also led the country for nearly 20 years (1981-2000). In 1982 the war of secession in the Casamence region¹² (South Senegal) began: Guinea Bissau and the USSR supported the rebels, the peace agreement between the belligerents was signed in 2004. Between 1989 and 1991, the Senegalese-Mauritanian conflict, a classic shepherd-farmer conflict due to drought, pitted Mauritanian Fulani shepherds against Senegalese Soninke farmers. Diplomatic relations between the two countries were broken off. The presidency of Abdoulaye

¹¹ Mali – CERPESC Dossier, [online] Available at: https://europavarietas.org/csdp/mali_dossier (Accessed 20 March, 2024).

¹² The borders with the French possessions are fixed by a treaty signed in 1886. Casamance, formerly Portuguese (Ziguinchor was founded by the Portuguese) is attached to France. (Türke, 2009 : 5-9)

Wade (2000-2012) ended the 40-year rule of the Socialist Party (PS) and companies from Europe, the United Arab Emirates, Brazil, China, Iran and India invested heavily in the country.¹³

Gambia gained its independence in 1965 but remained a member of the British Commonwealth. Between 1970-1994, Dawda K. Jawara led the country. In the summer of 1981, during the president's absence in London, an unsuccessful coup attempt took place. Senegalese army and British special forces intervened to protect him. The failure of the coup precipitated the creation of the Senegambia Confederation. From the 1990s, a minimal democratic process began in the country. In 1994, Yahya Jammeh supported by Gambian troops participating in the West Force in Liberia, dissatisfied with the delay in the payment of their pay, took power after a successful coup. On 2 October 2013, Jammeh announced that Gambia would leave the Commonwealth¹⁴, after Arabic replaced English as the official language. After several failed coups d'état, Jammeh imposed a state of emergency in January 2017, then the Senegalese army crossed the border, and finally Adama Barrow became president.

Guinea was the first to break radically with France under the presidency of Sékou Touré, who led the country for more than a quarter of a century (1958-1984). Touré became one of the leading figures in the African independence movements with his special "Religiously Marxism". Approaching the Eastern Bloc, he pushed for increased industrialization, which failed. In 1961, Guinea joined, together with Mali and Ghana, the Union of African States. The Union separated in 1962, when Guinea began to move closer to the United States, against the Marxist line of its partners (Türke, 2018: 17.) In 1970, Guinean emigrants, supported by the Portuguese Navy, unsuccessfully attempted to capture Conakry in Operation *Mar Verde* (Green Sea). From 1975, the country abandoned its foreign policy neutrality and restored relations with France. As a result of the coups of 1984-85, Lansana Konté came to power, and his nearly quarter-century rule resulted in Western orientation, moderate liberalization, and privatization (until 2008). He was followed by the 11-year rule of Alpha Condé, who was overthrown in a coup by Mamadi Doumbouya in 2021.

Burkina Faso (Upper Volta until 1984) gained its independence in 1960, but remained economically closely tied to France, and its political system proved unstable. President Maurice Yaméogo was ousted in 1966 by Sangoulé Lamizana (-1980), who advocated reconciliation and positive neutrality. Between 1961 and 1985, relations between Burkina Faso and Mali were strained by the border dispute over the Agacher Strip (275x50 km). Mali claimed four villages in the area because the population there

¹³ Senegal – Dossier, [online] Available at: https://europavarietas.org/csdp/senegal_dossier (Accessed 9 January, 2025).

¹⁴ Gambia rejoined the Commonwealth of Nations only in 2018. (Fage - Tordoff, 2004: 475-477.)

is said to be 'Malian par excellence', and highlighted the right to self-determination of local minorities (Tuaregs). After the Mali intervention in 1985 (the Christmas War) next year, the judgment of the ICJ based on the recognition by both parties of the border established before independence by the French colonial administration, divided the 3,000 square kilometers almost equally between the two states. After several coups, Blaise Compaoré led the country from 1987 to 2014 (Fage -Tordoff, 2004: 437, 443-444, 471 and 474-475).

Niger gained independence in 1960 and Hamani Diori (1960-74) was elected president. A 4-year drought (1974-78) killed 80% of the country's livestock. French, German and Japanese companies began to exploit the country's mineral resources. In 1984 a new severe famine hit the north of the country, particularly in areas occupied by nomadic pastoralists, and many Nigerien Tuaregs fled to Algeria and Libya. Since the late 1980s, the Tuaregs have been demanding a more equitable sharing of wealth, and in May 1990 a 5 years rebellion broke out between Tuareg refugees (20,000 people) repatriated from Libya and the army. Under the presidency of Mamadou Tandja (1999-2010), between 2007 and 2009, the Tuareg uprising broke out again. A state of exception was declared in the Agadez region and so Areva profited most from the turmoil.¹⁵

Chad gained its independence in 1960. Since the beginning the rebellious, pro-independence Arab north has been at war with black Animist/Christian southern Chad. The first civil war lasted from 1965 to 1979. The secessionist aspirations of FROLINAT in northern Chad (Tibesti region) were supported by Sudan and Libya. President François Tombalbaye (1960-1975) requested military assistance from France in February 1968, based on the defense treaty between the two countries. Between 1982 and 1989, the country was practically divided into two parts.¹⁶ From 1983 the northern President Hissen Habré (1982-1990, also supported by the CIA) received French military support against Goukouni Oueddei uprisings and the Libyan intervention in the north.¹⁷ In 1986 an anti-Libya French operation (*Épervier*: sparrow hawk), was deployed for many years, and in the Sahel region Chad became the most important permanent base of the French air force. With their help next year Chad recaptured the 100 km wide *Aouzou strip* in the north, which Libya had occupied in 1973 and annexed in 1976. From 1990, President Idriss Déby (1990-2021) became one of France's most important allies in the region. The crisis that developed since 2003 in the area of Darfur in Sudan has particularly affected Chad, because the Déby clan itself had been cut in two by the artificial border between Chad and Sudan (established by the colonialists).¹⁸

¹⁵ Bene 2022. 242-246.

¹⁶ The oil fields are in the south.

¹⁷ Fage – Tordoff 2004. 468.

¹⁸ Türke A. I. 2024 (Springer) 78-79.

In Cameroon, the colony acquired from the Germans in 1916 was divided between France and Great Britain, and in 1945 the territory came under the auspices of the United Nations. In 1960 the French part became independent. British Northern Cameroon decided by referendum in 1961 to join Nigeria (*Sardauna*), while British Southern Cameroons merged with the Republic of Cameroon, creating the Federal Republic of Cameroon. The new state's economic development began under the presidency of Ahmadou Ahidjo (1960-1982), but the large income differences between the north and the south caused internal tensions. For more than 42 years, since 1982, the former Prime Minister (1975-) Paul Biya has been at the helm of the country, having crushed a 1984 coup. He established a centralized authoritarian system against the left and despite the formal restoration of the multi-party system in 1990, he has essentially ruled the country without opposition.¹⁹

Nigeria also became independent in 1960 as federal state of 3 regions. In 1967, the Republic of Biafra was proclaimed in the eastern part of the country under the leadership of the military governor of the Eastern Region, O. E. Ojukwu (1967-70). Behind the scenes France actively supported the separatists. Under Yakubu Gowon (1966-1975), the country was characterized by radical nationalization and rapprochement with the Soviet Union. In the early 1980s, democracy took a back seat, and with the economic crisis, religiously fundamentalism grew stronger. Here too, it was a constant problem that the north provided most of the army's personnel, while the south provided most of the officer corps. Between continuous coups, bloody riots began in 1991 between Christians and Muslims, and between 1993-1998, General Abacha established a harsh military dictatorial regime. Then during Abubakar's leadership, Nigeria adopted a modified version of the 1979 constitution, which provided for multiparty elections. Under the Baptist President Olusegun Obasanjo (1999-2007), a wave of privatization began. Meanwhile, the Hausa people of the north and the Yoruba people of the west attacked each other. On June 2006, he signed the Greentree Agreement with Cameroon which formally put an end to the oil and natural gas-rich Bakassi peninsula border dispute, agreeing the withdrawal of Nigerian troops and transfer of authority in the peninsula. The territory was completely ceded to Cameroon on 14 August 2008 (Mayer, 2022).²⁰

Boko Haram, whose goal is the creation of a so-called caliphate governed by Sharia law, was formed in 2002 in Maiduguri (Nigeria, capital of Borno State) by the preacher Mohamed Yusuf. This group is hostile to any Western influence and is based on Radical Salafi and Takfiri ideology. In 2000, Sharia law had already been established in the Muslim states of Northern Nigeria, but it was more political than

¹⁹ Fage – Tordoff 2004. 468.; Cameroun – CERPESC Dossier, [online] Available at: https://europavarietas.org/csdp/cameroun_dossier (Accessed 9 January, 2025).

²⁰ Fage – Tordoff, 2004. 424., 434-435., 469-470.

religious in nature. In 2009-2010, Boko Haram launched a series of simultaneous attacks in four states (Bauchi, Borno, Yobe and Kano). After the failure of the insurrection, many members fled to Niger, Chad and, especially since 2014, Cameroon. In 2012, members of Boko Haram participated in the fighting in northern Mali alongside MUJAO. In May 2013, President Goodluck Jonathan launched a major offensive against the group without success. But following the intervention of the Chadian army in 2015, Boko Haram was heavily weakened. During the formation of DAESH West Africa Province (ISWAP²¹, March 7, 2015) Boko Haram declared its allegiance, but in August 2016 they split. The fight between Boko Haram and ISWAP is ongoing.

The 2011 Libyan war also had a decisive impact on the Sahel, setting off a domino effect in the region. Among other things, after the failed rebellions of the 1990s, the Tuaregs fled from Mali to Libya, where a significant number of Tuaregs also fought in Gaddafi's Legion. At that time, of the approximately 1.5 million Tuareg population, 550,000 lived in Mali, 800,000 in Niger, 50,000 in Algeria, and the rest in Burkina Faso and Libya. In the period between 2006 and 2009, the Tuareg secessionist movements in Mali and Niger strengthened.²² After Gaddafi fell, the Tuaregs who had gone to Libya infiltrated Mali, but they did not want to place themselves under the authority of the Malian state. In the northern Mali (Azawad) region, partly as a result of the Libyan crisis, the proportion of armed AQIM and also well-armed Tuareg fighters increased. All it took was one spark for this powder keg to explode: Mali as a state fell apart. In 2011, it was already expected that the Tuareg uprising could break out again under the influence of these factors if under effective leadership. And this spark ignited in April 2012. In addition, the USA, NATO, (particularly the French), significantly underestimated the respect for the Muslim Gaddafi in the Sahel region. Gaddafi-supported investments were conspicuous throughout Mali. Mali, one of the world's five least developed countries, has good reason to fear that the fall of Gaddafi would end its development (Türke, 2012).

The French intervention was more likely due to neighboring Niger, as it was feared that the Tuareg secessionist movement would spread further in the region and that the Agadez region in northern Niger would also declare its independence: the civil war would pose a serious threat to the AREVA (since 2018: Orano) uranium mines, endangering one of the main uranium processing sites for French nuclear power plants. President François Hollande therefore decided on military intervention (*Operation Serval*, 11 January 2013 – 15 July 2014) - while he was forced to significantly revise his previous diplomacy, which called for respect for human rights:

²¹ In March 2019, DAESH in the Greater Sahara (IS-GS) joined DAESH in West Africa.

²² In the 20th century, the Tuareg uprisings of 1916-1917 (Niger), 1962-63 (Mali), and 1990-1995 (Mali and Niger) were the most significant.

the issue of the disappeared Chadian opposition figures was therefore removed from the agenda, because the French (led) operation definitely needed Chad as a solid base for its 'anti-terror' fight in the Sahel region. The local coalition for the fight against terrorism, the G5 Sahel²³ initiative, was established under strong French patronage in 2014 (Soro, 2022).

French led interventions (*Serval, Barkhane, Takuba, Sabre*) were doomed to failure in the short term, because on the one hand, French policy was unwilling to take into account local political interests and often acted contrary to them. On the other hand, in this context, they insisted on supporting local corrupt leaders until the last moment, who were not backed by mass support, and essentially 'under one roof' they also classified both the Tuaregs (while in Niger the Tuaregs had previously been considered allies) and the reform movements (which often perform state functions more successfully than the ruling powers) that organized the resistance, based on centuries-old foundations as "terrorists". Moreover, French diplomacy neglected the sovereignty of the Sahel countries and prohibited the local central authorities from even engaging in dialogue with them. Because of all this, the French lost their support base in a short time and, after the fall of the political leaders they supported, were forced to liquidate their bases in Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso (Türke, 2024: 28-40). The new leadership of which countries almost immediately withdrew from the G5 Sahel. Meanwhile (partly by reviving historical relations, as in the case of Mali) Russian and Chinese relations in the region strengthened. The vacated French bases were taken over by members of the Wagner Private Military Group, who – at least initially – managed to win over a significant part of the population in a short time, using professional propagandist methods, and to instill in their minds that the main problem in the region has been the presence of the French. In 2020-2024, almost all of the Sahel countries experienced a coup or attempted coup d'Etat: in three years, eight successful coups have taken place. (With the exception of Mauritania, Nigeria, Cameroon, and Senegal, where a so-called institutional coup took place). The Sahel region (along with Gabon) has now been labeled 'the coup belt' (*ceinture de coups d'État*) (Gubal, 2023) which means that the region can still be considered one of the most unstable regions in Africa.

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²³ Currently, only Mauritania and Chad are members of the initiative. The (defense) Alliance of Sahel States (AES) was created by the coup states (Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso) on 16 September 2023.

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PART I: REGIONAL OVERVIEW

CHAPTER 3

Economy of the Sahel: Challenges, Opportunities, and Geopolitical Tensions

Keywords: *Sahel, Africa, China, Economy, geopolitics, USA, France, Climate Change.*

Introduction

The Sahel region of Africa, sandwiched between the Sahara and the Savannah, is a vast, semi-arid region that forms a transitional zone stretching approximately 5,000 kilometres from Senegal on the Atlantic coast to Eritrea on the Red Sea coast. This expansive area encompasses diverse geographic and agroecological systems, spanning 14 countries and providing a home for roughly 400 million people. This region is settled by desert-dwelling peoples from the Sahara in the north who migrated to the bordering areas of the south in search of more favourable living conditions. Even though the Sahel is characterised by diverse cultures, historical significance, and varying levels of accessibility and stability, the region is among the world's least developed areas. The Sahel Human Development Report, 2023, published under the auspices of the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), highlights that the region's economic affairs are intricately tied to energy access, climate challenges, and regional disparities (UNDP, 2024).

This chapter examines the complex economic landscape of the Sahel region, exploring the environmental challenges, political instability, and external influences that shape the economic realities of each country within the region. Ten major mainland countries are taken into account, as defined by the United Nations Integrated Strategy for the Sahel (UNISS): Senegal, Gambia, Mauritania, Guinea, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Chad, Cameroon, and Nigeria. Analysing the current economic status of these countries and broader regional dynamics is imperative in identifying critical factors impacting the economic conditions and suggesting strategic interventions to enhance economic resilience and create prosperity across the Sahel. The chapter also examines the geopolitical tensions involving major powers such as the USA, France, and China to understand how these relationships affect the region's economic stability and development prospects.

Background

Historically, the Sahel has served as a cradle for major Ancient and Medieval West and Central African kingdoms, acting as strategic waypoints and termini for trans-Saharan trade routes. Notable among these were the ancient Kingdom of Ghana, which emerged in the late fourth century and peaked around the year 1000 CE, followed by the influential empires of Mali, Songhai, and Kanem-Bornu. These kingdoms thrived as centres of trade and culture long after Ghana's decline, underscoring the Sahel's historical significance as a bridge between the arid north and the tropical south. The region, which is both ecologically diverse and culturally rich, faces major economic challenges that hinder its overall development and growth within the African continent. The Sahel has been severely impacted by climate change, which has accelerated land degradation, reduced water resources, and led to a decline in biodiversity. The "Great Sahelian Drought" of 1968-73 had a severe impact on the economic backbone of the Sahel, particularly in livestock and agriculture. This crisis witnessed a major mobilisation of international aid and the establishment of the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) by the United Nations (Epule et al., 2013) (Batterbury & Warren, 2001). Although subsequent decades saw similar drought situations, the Sahel demonstrated economic resilience, and societal coping mechanisms had been developed since the earlier catastrophe. Over the past three decades, the ecological boundary of the Sahel has shifted southward, resulting in a reduction of arable land and an increase in more frequent and severe droughts, desertification, and flooding. These environmental changes critically undermine agriculture, a vital sector for the region's economy. The Sahel region is also plagued by political instability, armed conflict and terrorism, which have disrupted livelihoods, threatened state stability, and eroded social peace. The COVID-19 pandemic has compounded these challenges, disrupting food production and closing markets and borders. Three important countries, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Chad, have undergone a series of coups in recent years, exacerbating political uncertainties (Ngima, 2023; Calcagno, 2025).

Sahel Countries: Overview of Economic Status

Before delving into the Sahelian economy, a brief yet comprehensive overview of the economic conditions in the region's countries is imperative. These countries collectively face a mix of structural challenges and opportunities shaped by natural resource endowments, political climates, and external economic pressures. The primary data source for this section is the African Economic Outlook 2024, along with other relevant open-source literature. (AEO, 2024).

1. Senegal. The Republic of Senegal, situated on the Atlantic Ocean coastline and the westernmost country in the Sahel, exhibits one of the most diversified economies in West Africa, which is underpinned by sectors such as agriculture,

mining, construction, and services. Its economy grew at a rate of 4.3% in 2023, up from 3.8% in 2022, primarily driven by resilience in the agricultural sector and growth in industry. Inflation fell significantly from 9.7% in 2022 to 5.9% in 2023, supported by tighter monetary policies implemented by the Central Bank of West African States. Fiscal reforms and increased revenues helped narrow the budget deficit from 6.5% of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in 2022 to 4.9% in 2023 (AEO (Senegal) 2024). Senegal's economic growth is expected to accelerate to 9.3% in 2024, driven by the commencement of hydrocarbon production and increased investment in the infrastructure and energy sectors. Recent infrastructure investments and prudent fiscal policies have sustained steady economic growth. However, youth unemployment and climate vulnerability in agriculture remain major challenges. Offshore oil and gas discoveries (e.g. Sangomar Field Development near Dakar) hold transformative potential, provided revenues are equitably and effectively managed. The project, which could potentially make Senegal a major oil and gas powerhouse, is expected to generate more than \$1 billion annually over the next three decades. (Africa News, 2024)

2. Gambia. The economy of the Republic of Gambia is relatively small (like its geographical expanse) and primarily reliant on agriculture, expatriate remittances, and tourism. At the same time, growth remains moderate but susceptible to external shocks and climate impacts. The country faces high debt levels and a narrow economic base. Strategic diversification in agriculture and the expansion of the tourism sector could catalyse economic stability. Gambia's economic growth was projected at 6.1% in 2024, supported by investments in agriculture, services, construction, and public infrastructure, with growth slightly slowing to 5.8% in 2025 due to climate-related vulnerabilities. Fiscal and current account deficits are expected to improve by narrowing to 2.7% and 7.2% of GDP by 2024. Inflation is projected to ease to 12.5% in 2024 and 11% in 2025, driven by tight monetary policies and declining global food and energy prices. (AEO (Gambia) 2024).

3. Mauritania. Mauritania's economy is largely driven by its resources, with iron ore and fisheries being the primary contributors. While its natural wealth, including untapped offshore oil reserves, presents opportunities, inadequate infrastructure and volatility in global commodity prices continue to impede development. Future economic prospects hinge on expanded resource extraction and infrastructure improvements. Mauritania's economic growth slowed to 3.4% in 2023, down from 6.4% in 2022, primarily due to reduced industrial and fisheries production, as well as lower public investment. Inflation dropped from 9.6% to 5% due to tighter monetary policies and easing food prices. The budget deficit improved to 2.3% of GDP, supported by increased tax revenue. In comparison, public debt fell to 48% of GDP

following a debt restructuring deal with Saudi Arabia, thereby reducing the risk of debt distress to a moderate level. (AEO (Mauritania) 2024).

4. Guinea. Guinea possesses rich bauxite and iron ore reserves, with mining as the cornerstone of its economy. Its economy, one of the most resilient in West Africa, grew by an estimated 5.7% in 2023, up from 4% in 2022, driven by agriculture and mining. Inflation decreased from 10.5% in 2022 to 7.8% in 2023, supported by a stable exchange rate, mitigating imported inflation. Despite an increase in the budget deficit to 1.6% of GDP, Guinea maintained one of the lowest deficits among the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) members. Public debt decreased from 40.1% of GDP in 2022 to 35.2% in 2023. However, challenges remain, including limited shock absorption capacity and a stable but high current account deficit at 8.6% of GDP, primarily financed by foreign direct investment in the Simandou iron ore project (AEO (Guinea) 2024). However, despite its resource wealth, political instability and infrastructure deficits constrain growth. Addressing these systemic issues and ensuring transparency in mining investments could unlock extensive economic gains.

5. Mali. Mali's economy, dominated by agriculture and gold mining, remains highly vulnerable due to its reliance on commodity prices and harvest outcomes. As one of the 25 poorest countries globally, cotton and gold exports account for approximately 80% of export earnings, underscoring their critical role in fiscal stability (Moody's Analytics, 2024). However, persistent political instability and security challenges continue to disrupt economic activities and deter investment. Despite these hurdles, Mali's economic prospects are improving, with growth projected at 4.7% in 2024 and 5.3% in 2025. Key drivers include the expansion of extractive industries, particularly the commencement of lithium production in 2024, alongside the revival of the textiles sector and the development of wheat production and processing. (AEO (Mali) 2024) Additionally, the gold industry remains a vital economic pillar with opportunities for growth through new exploration and investments in artisanal mining.

6. Burkina Faso. The landlocked Sahelian country, Burkina Faso, relies on agriculture and gold mining for economic sustenance. Burkina Faso's leading exports include gold, cotton, zinc, cashews, and sesame seeds. Imports include refined petroleum, delivery trucks, packaged medicines, electricity, and aircraft. Despite ongoing security challenges, Burkina Faso's economic growth rebounded to 3.6% in 2023, driven by the services and agricultural sectors. Inflation decreased substantially to 0.7% in 2023, primarily due to improved food supplies and restrictive monetary policies. The budget deficit improved from 10.4% of GDP in 2022 to 6.9% in 2023, supported by higher tax revenues. However, declining cotton export values widened the current account deficit to 8.2% of GDP. Growth prospects remain favourable, with projections of 4.1% in 2024 and 4.3% in 2025, supported by rising agricultural and extractive production (AEO (Burkina Faso) 2024). However, the country faces severe

disruptions from extremist violence and political uncertainty. Expanding agricultural output through modern techniques and leveraging its mining potential could foster recovery and growth.

7. Niger. Niger remains one of the poorest countries in the Sahel region, heavily reliant on subsistence farming, livestock, and uranium mining. Uranium and oil production, alongside investments in renewable energy, present opportunities for sustainable growth. Niger's economy faced challenges in 2023, with growth slowing to 2.5% due to political instability, ECOWAS sanctions, and frozen external funding. However, the outlook for 2024 is positive, with a projected growth rate of 10.4%, driven by a five-fold increase in crude oil production and resilience in the agricultural sector (AEO (Niger) 2024). Inflation is expected to remain low due to robust agricultural performance. Fiscal consolidation and increased tax revenue from resumed commercial activities and oil production are anticipated to improve the budget deficit. At the same time, the current account balance is set to benefit from surging oil exports. However, challenges like desertification, poor infrastructure, and a rapidly growing population exacerbate its economic vulnerabilities.

8. Chad. Another landlocked country, Chad's economy is predominantly oil-based, supplemented by agriculture. Geographic isolation, insufficient infrastructure, and political volatility hinder development. While new oil field explorations promise economic expansion, enhancing agricultural productivity and fostering regional trade partnerships are essential for long-term growth. Its economy grew by 4.3% in 2023, up from 3.4% in 2022, driven primarily by a 13.3% surge in the oil sector and increased net exports. Inflation decreased to 4.8%, remaining above the regional target, due to high food prices. The budget surplus reached 4.8% of GDP, aided by exceptional oil revenues. (AEO (Chad) 2024) Despite this, poverty remains a challenge, with a 42.3% national poverty rate. Structural challenges persist, including a fragile banking sector and dependence on oil revenues. Also, the country faces challenges such as the refugee crisis, high food prices, and threats from racially or ethnically motivated violent extremist (REMVE)-groups.

9. Cameroon. Cameroon is a lower-middle-income country with high levels of poverty with more than 23% of Cameroonians living below the international poverty line, but it boasts a diverse economic structure, including agriculture, oil and gas, mining and services. Despite this, corruption and unequal wealth distribution impede equitable development. Prioritising infrastructure expansion and better governance in natural resource management can support supplementary economic diversification and growth. Cameroon's economy grew modestly to 3.8% in 2023, up from 3.6% in 2022, driven by strong performance in forestry, logging, and services. Inflation rose to 7.4% due to higher food prices. The budget deficit narrowed to 0.9% of GDP, supported by rationalised public spending and tax reforms. Public debt decreased to

41.8% of GDP, while the current account deficit improved to 2.7%, driven by increased gas production. Economic growth is expected to rise to 4.1% in 2024, with increased gas production and commodity prices. (AEO (Cameroon) 2024).

10. Nigeria. As Africa's largest economy, Nigeria's economic profile is driven by vast oil reserves, agriculture, and a burgeoning services sector. The country is implementing reforms to improve its economy to face inflation, a depreciating currency, and a sluggish global economy (Nigeria Development Update, 2024). However, heavy reliance on oil revenues, political instability, and corruption present persistent challenges for Nigeria. Nigeria's economic growth slowed to 2.9% in 2023, down from 3.3% in 2022, due to high inflation and a depreciating Naira. Nigeria's inflation spiked to 24.5%, primarily influenced by rising fuel costs. Despite these challenges, the fiscal deficit improved to 5.1% of GDP in 2023, supported by higher revenues, though public debt service remains a concern at 111% of federal revenue. The current account surplus increased to 0.9% of GDP, bolstered by oil exports. Economic growth is projected to improve to 3.2% in 2024, driven by higher oil production and consumer demand. (AEO (Nigeria) 2024). Immense growth opportunities exist in sectors like technology, renewable energy, and agro-processing, which could reduce dependency on oil.

The above overview of the Sahelian countries presents a tapestry of economic opportunities and systemic challenges. While resource wealth offers pathways to growth, structural issues such as political instability, climate change, and inadequate infrastructure constrain progress. Key priorities include economic diversification, investment in human capital, and improving governance to achieve sustainable and inclusive development.

Reviewing IMF's GDP Data for Sahel Countries

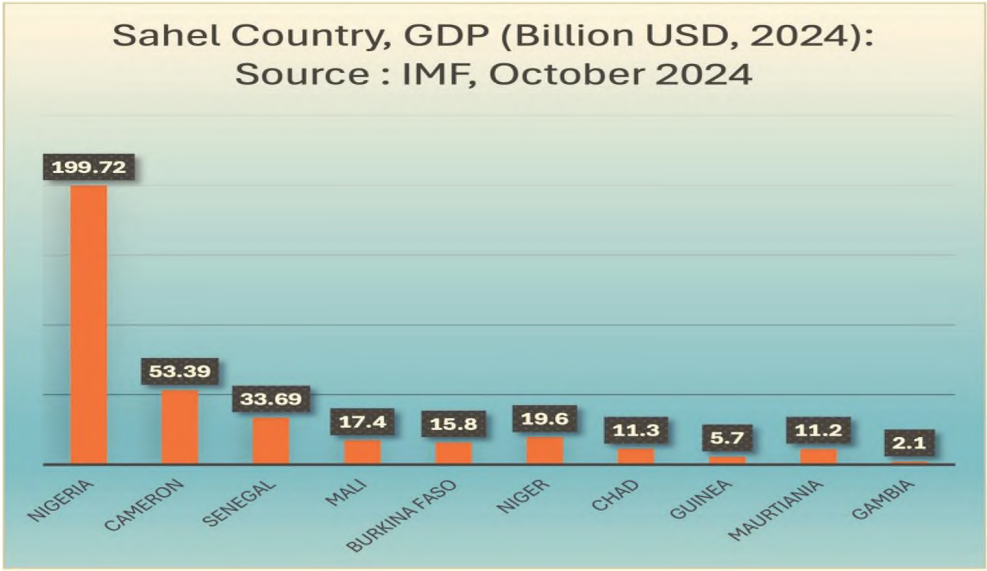
Gross Domestic Product (GDP) data is always a key indicator of economic performance, measuring the total value of goods and services produced within a country. It, in reality, helps assess economic growth, compare economies, guide policy and investment decisions, and indicate living standards. It also highlights sectoral contributions, informs debt and fiscal management, and reflects global trade trends. Analysing the GDP of Sahel countries may help respective governments and investors to make strategic decisions to promote stability, diversification, and sustainable growth in the region.

Broadly, the GDP distribution among the Sahel countries, according to the IMF's World Economic Outlook (WEO, 2024), highlights major economic disparities, with Nigeria (199.72 billion USD) standing as the dominant economic power in the region, contributing the largest share to the Sahel's overall economic output. This reflects Nigeria's diversified economy, which benefits from major

contributions from agriculture, manufacturing, and services despite its heavy dependence on oil exports. However, inflationary pressures, currency fluctuations, and security concerns often hampered Nigeria's economic growth. Cameroon (53.39 billion USD) is the second-largest economy in the Sahel, bolstered by a relatively diversified economy that includes agriculture, oil production, and a growing services sector. Despite its economic stability compared to some neighbours, Cameroon faces challenges such as corruption, political instability, and uneven regional development. The third-largest economy, Senegal (33.69 billion USD), is growing, supported by substantial public investments, a burgeoning services sector, and anticipated gains from hydrocarbon production. Its economic resilience stems from stable governance and an investor-friendly business environment, although structural weaknesses in infrastructure and youth unemployment remain challenges. (WEO, 2024)

The economies of Mali (17.4 billion USD), Burkina Faso (15.8 billion USD), and Niger (19.6 billion USD) are heavily reliant on agriculture and mineral resources, particularly gold and uranium. However, persistent political instability, insurgency threats, and climate change risks impact economic growth and investment inflows. These countries also struggle with weak industrial bases, high poverty rates, and inadequate infrastructure. Chad (11.3 billion USD) and Mauritania (11.2 billion USD) maintain lower GDP figures, primarily driven by their dependence on oil, mining, and agriculture. (WEO, 2024) Chad, in particular, faces economic volatility due to its reliance on oil exports, a fragile financial system, and ongoing security concerns. Mauritania benefits from its iron ore and fisheries, but remains susceptible to external shocks and fluctuations in global commodity prices. (WEO, 2024)

At the lower end of the spectrum, Guinea (5.7 billion USD) and Gambia (2.1 billion USD) represent some of the smallest economies in the region. Guinea's economy is driven by bauxite mining and agriculture, while Gambia relies on tourism, remittances, and agriculture. Both countries face high levels of poverty and structural economic challenges but have the potential for growth if strategic investments and reforms are implemented. (WEO, 2024)



(Source: Compiled from World Economic Outlook, IMF, October 2024)

<https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/WEO/Issues/2024/10/22/world-economic-outlook-october-2024>

The International Monetary Fund data shows that economies of the Sahel region are predominantly resource-driven, with countries relying heavily on commodities such as oil, gold, uranium, and iron ore. This dependence exposes them to fluctuations in global market prices, making economic stability uncertain. Additionally, political instability and security challenges in countries like Mali, Niger, and Chad constrain growth, as conflicts, coups, and governance weaknesses deter investment and disrupt economic activities. Limited industrialization and underdeveloped infrastructure hinder diversification, preventing long-term sustainability and economic expansion. However, there are emerging opportunities for transformation, particularly in countries like Senegal and Mauritania, which are capitalizing on new industries such as hydrocarbons, renewable energy, and agribusiness. Investments in technology and manufacturing could drive regional growth. The future of the Sahel's economy will largely depend on strategic policies prioritising diversification, regional cooperation, sustainable investments, and governance reforms to mitigate the risks posed by political instability and climate change.

The Economic Landscape of the Sahel

Despite the vital role agriculture plays in the economies of most of these countries—employing a major portion of the population—the sector struggles with productivity issues due to erratic weather patterns and inadequate infrastructure. This

economic backdrop sets the stage for understanding the broader challenges and opportunities that define the region's prospects for growth. The Sahel is projected to experience economic growth, with an average rate of 4.7% over the medium term. While this growth is robust, it cannot narrow the income gap with more developed economies (International Monetary Fund, 2023). However, by 2030, the region's GDP is expected to increase by 110% from current levels, driven by improvements in infrastructure and improved access to energy. (International Energy Agency, 2022).

Sectoral Analysis. The agricultural sector remains central in the Sahel region, employing over 60% of the workforce. (Sahel Alliance, 2024) Despite its critical role in the economy, agricultural productivity faces numerous challenges, including the adverse effects of climate change and limited access to modern farming technologies. These factors hinder the sector's efficiency and output, impacting food security and regional economic stability. Similarly, the energy landscape in the Sahel is also noteworthy, with a heavy dependence on oil-based power generation, which accounts for 75% of the region's energy portfolio. However, there has been a gradual shift toward renewable sources (e.g., hydro or solar power), which now account for about 20% of the energy mix. Notably, Mali has made major strides in hydropower, while solar energy usage is increasing across the Sahel, indicating a gradual yet steady transition towards more sustainable energy solutions. The Sahel boasts a wealth of untapped natural resources that present opportunities for fiscal sustainability, which is especially important as the world shifts towards low-carbon energy sources (Cheikh et al. 2021). Effectively managing these natural resources is vital for ensuring long-term economic stability in the region. Each of these sectors—agriculture, energy, and natural resources—plays a pivotal role in the economic landscape of the Sahel, and strategic enhancements in these areas could lead to substantial improvements in the overall economic health of the region.

Demographic Dynamics. The Sahel region is also undergoing demographic shifts that are shaping its economic and social landscapes. The population is projected to grow from 100 million in 2019 to 140 million by 2030, a substantial increase that highlights the region's high fertility rates and improving, yet still uneven, healthcare outcomes (International Energy Agency, 2022). This rapid population growth presents both challenges and opportunities, particularly as it coincides with increasing urbanisation. Cities and urban centres in the Sahel are expanding, which strains existing infrastructure and services and provides new avenues for economic development and innovation.

Although the Sahel's demographic profile is notably youthful, a large proportion of the population is under 25. (UNDP, 2024). This youthful demographic could potentially provide a demographic dividend and a boost to economic growth, resulting from a larger workforce relative to the dependent population, provided that sufficient

investments are made in key areas. Realising this potential dividend hinges critically on strategic investments in education and job creation. Educational systems need to be scaled and enhanced to equip this burgeoning youth population with the skills required in modern and developing economies. Simultaneously, there needs to be a focus on creating job opportunities to absorb these young individuals into productive employment sectors. Without these targeted investments, the growing number of young people could exacerbate unemployment and underemployment, leading to social and economic instability. Arguably, the Sahel stands at a critical juncture, where the decisions made today regarding education, urban planning, and economic policy will shape the region's future. Prioritising education and employment can transform the challenges of rapid demographic changes into a springboard for sustainable growth and development.

Challenges. For several decades, the Sahel region has faced complex economic and environmental challenges that substantially impact its development prospects. Rising public debt levels are a major concern. As of 2023, the average public debt in the Sahel has reached approximately 51% of GDP (International Monetary Fund, 2023). This high indebtedness restricts the region's ability to borrow more, underscoring the urgent need to enhance domestic revenue collection and shift the focus towards grants and non-debt-creating inflows to finance development projects.

Food security across the Sahel, severely impacted by structural and environmental factors, remains a critical challenge. Projections for 2023 indicate that approximately 45,000 people, including 42,000 in Burkina Faso and 2,500 in Mali, are experiencing catastrophic levels of hunger (Guèye and Mbaye, 2024). This situation is exacerbated by inadequate agricultural productivity and recurring natural disasters, which disrupt food supply chains and increase the vulnerability of the poorest communities. A 2023 projection indicated that Africa's annual food imports could surge from \$35 billion to \$110 billion by 2025, highlighting the region's heavy dependence on external food supplies (World Meteorological Organisation, 2023). The depth of the crisis is evident in the Global Food Security Index, where Sahelian nations occupy some of the lowest positions—Burkina Faso ranks 89th, Niger 97th, Chad 103rd, and Nigeria 107th among 113 countries (Guèye and Mbaye, 2024). These figures underscore the urgent need for coordinated interventions to address the root causes of food insecurity and strengthen local food systems.

For the past several decades, Sahel has been experiencing severe impacts from climate change, threatening its agricultural sector and amplifying existing economic and social pressures. Rising temperatures and erratic rainfall patterns have led to frequent droughts and floods, which have severely affected crop yields and livestock productivity. These adverse effects on agriculture, a cornerstone of the

Sahel's economy, are reducing food availability and driving migration within and across countries as people search for better living conditions and economic opportunities.

Addressing these challenges requires a multipronged approach focused on strategic development and effective resource management. The Sahelian countries need to leverage their diverse and dynamic potential through targeted initiatives that enhance agricultural resilience, promote sustainable economic practices, and build robust infrastructures to withstand climate impacts. By doing so, the region can transform its challenges into opportunities for sustainable economic development and long-term prosperity.

Countries such as Mali, Burkina Faso, Chad, Mauritania, and Niger remain among the least developed in the world. The GDPs of these countries are markedly lower than global averages, with agriculture playing a crucial role in their economies, employing a major portion of the population. However, the productivity of this sector is frequently undermined by erratic weather patterns and inadequate infrastructure. The region indeed exhibits a mix of promising growth potential alongside socio-economic challenges. However, addressing public debt management, food security, and climate resilience remains crucial for sustainable development in the coming years.

Challenges Affecting Economic Stability

As mentioned in the paper, the Sahel is inherently vulnerable to climate change, which exacerbates issues such as desertification and unpredictable rainfall patterns. These environmental changes have a severe impact on agriculture, reducing the amount of arable land and diminishing agricultural productivity. Such ecological degradation poses a significant threat to food security and the economic foundation of a region heavily reliant on agriculture. The Economic Commission for Africa, as far back as 2007, predicted that if land degradation continues at the current rate, more than half of cultivated agricultural land in Africa, particularly in the Sahel region, could be rendered infertile by 2050 (UN-OHRLLS, 2013) (United Nations Economic and Social Council, 2007).

Security concerns further exacerbate the Sahel's challenges, with various religiously extremist groups affiliated with Al Qaeda and DAESH (e.g., DAESH Sahel Province or ISSP) causing widespread instability across national borders. The presence of these groups undermines the region's economic prospects. The resultant instability deters foreign investment and disrupts internal and cross-border trade, stunting economic growth and development. Political instability is another critical challenge, with many Sahel countries experiencing frequent coups, weak governance, and turbulent political transitions. This instability complicates the investment climate and long-term economic planning, impeding development efforts.

Additionally, infrastructural deficits limit economic progress in the Sahel. As correctly noted in various developmental studies, inadequate infrastructure, including poor road networks, insufficient power supply, and limited technological access, primarily hampers economic activities in rural areas, where the majority of the population resides (Jeffang et al., 2024). Despite these challenges, concerted efforts are being made to improve the region's economic prospects. Initiatives like the Sahel Alliance (2023) are mobilising resources to enhance infrastructure, education, and healthcare systems, which are crucial for fostering sustainable development and economic resilience (Bassou, 2024). While the Sahel faces numerous hurdles, a comprehensive understanding of its multifaceted challenges is crucial for developing effective strategies to promote economic stability and growth. The region's economic resilience will depend on addressing environmental and socio-political challenges, improving infrastructure, and leveraging international cooperation for sustainable development. By tackling these issues holistically, the Sahel has the potential to enhance its economic stability and achieve sustainable growth, turning its major challenges into opportunities for development.

Geopolitical Dynamics and External Powers in the Sahel

The Sahel region, strategically positioned as a geopolitical and economic corridor, has drawn significant attention from several major global powers, including the United States, the European Union, France, China, and Russia. Each of these nations has interests in the region that range from security and counterterrorism to economic investments and geopolitical influence. The interactions among these powers largely influence the Sahel's political and economic landscape, often complicating the region's internal dynamics.

The United States. For over a decade, the United States framed the Sahel as a critical front in the global fight against extremism. Its approach combined a strong counterterrorism footprint, including military bases and drone operations, particularly in Niger, with large-scale foreign aid and development programs to bolster economic stability and democratic governance. These measures supported direct counterterrorism goals and indirectly addressed the root causes of extremism. Economic initiatives of the US also sought to counter China's rising influence, channelling substantial investments into energy, infrastructure, and governance reforms. A 2024 United States Institute of Peace (USIP) report identified several key trends shaping the region's future, including: growing influence of China and Russia alongside France's declining role; expanding involvement of Algeria, Morocco, UAE and Türkiye; a destabilizing "youth bulge"; and increasing threats to agriculture and food security from conflict, terrorism, and climate change (USIP, 2024).

This strategy underwent a significant shift in March 2025, when the US announced the cancellation of 83% of USAID programs (Knickmeyer, 2025) (APA News, 2025). These cuts came amid a wave of uncertainties and growing instability in the Sahel, as observers warn that the sudden US aid cuts have eroded Washington's influence in the region, creating a strategic vacuum now being filled by Russia and China. Aid organizations highlight the loss of programs like USAID's Resilience in the Sahel Enhanced (RISE) initiative, which had demonstrably strengthened food security and community resilience in Burkina Faso and Niger.

According to a June 2025 UN OCHA (UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs) report, nearly 28.7 million people in the Sahel required urgent food, health, and protection assistance, reflecting a worsening humanitarian crisis driven by insecurity, displacement, and climate shocks. With limited funding, aid agencies were forced to scale back support for the most vulnerable, intensifying already dire conditions (OCHA, 2025) (Solomon, 2025). However, despite the aid cuts, the US has possibly not fully withdrawn from the region, as its approach may still emphasize intelligence-sharing, counterpropaganda, and selective partnerships, particularly with Morocco, Mauritania, and littoral West African states. This recalibration, with all uncertainties remaining, may mark a shift from a heavy military and aid footprint to a more targeted engagement model. However, many observers warn that the abrupt exit of a major donor risks undermining the stability and long-term development of the Sahel.

France. France's involvement in the Sahel region is deeply rooted in its colonial history, fostering cultural ties and strategic interests that continue to shape its current engagements. It has long been the Sahel region's primary security provider, with its involvement dating back to Operation Serval in 2013, aimed at combating religiously extremist militants in Mali. This was expanded into Operation Barkhane in 2014, deploying over 5000 soldiers across the Sahel. Beyond military intervention, economic and humanitarian aid efforts have been France's primary focus in the Sahel for decades. However, France's economic and strategic interests in the region have come under increasing strain, compounded by rising civil unrest. Anti-French sentiment has fuelled protests in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, reflecting discontent with perceived neo-colonial influence and the perceived ineffectiveness of addressing security and governance challenges. In August 2022, France withdrew its final troops from Mali, a decision influenced by escalating tensions and allegations of Russia's private army involvement in the region (Powell, 2022). So far, this withdrawal is disrupting France's economic foothold in the resource-rich Sahel and raising uncertainty for other European nations that have supported regional security efforts. France's diminished presence risks ceding economic and strategic ground to other global powers, including China and Russia, further complicating the region's geopolitical landscape. The

military presence of France in the Sahel primarily focused on supporting local governments to combat various insurgent groups and securing regions critical to French economic interests, particularly in uranium mining areas in Niger (Petidis, 2024) (Angyal, 2025). Such interventions aim to stabilise the region while protecting its economic stakes, reflecting a blend of security-driven and economic motivations behind its continued presence in the Sahel.

China. China's engagement in the Sahel is critical to its expansive economic strategy across Africa. It is driven by the desire to access the region's natural resources and strengthen its geopolitical influence through economic partnerships. Chinese investment in Africa broadly reflects a strategic mix of various objectives, ranging from economic, political, and security goals to securing resources, growing influence, and accessing important markets. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) remains the cornerstone of this engagement, focusing on large-scale infrastructure projects, such as transportation and power, alongside mining investments critical for China's industrial needs. (Chen, 2018). Guinea's Simandou iron ore mine and Niger's uranium sector (e.g. in Azelik) exemplify such priorities (Nyabiage, 2023) (Nantulya, 2025). China's infrastructure investment is coupled with arms exports and military aid, making it a key security partner in regions like the Sahel, where instability has opened opportunities for deeper involvement.

China's role extends beyond economic domains to defence diplomacy, with training programs for African military personnel and increasing peacekeeping deployments. This shift underscores Beijing's growing acknowledgment of the interdependence between security and economic development, as exemplified by its \$50 billion security aid pledge during the 2024 Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (Calabrese and Chen, 2024). Meanwhile, its investments are framed as "win-win" cooperation, emphasising noninterference and avoiding the political strings often associated with Western aid. However, critics note that China's actions sometimes mirror neocolonial patterns, prioritising resource extraction and creating long-term dependency. Concerns also persist about the sustainability of debt from loan-financed infrastructure, the lack of transparency in contracts, and whether the benefits of resource exploitation are equitably shared with local populations.

Key projects, such as the Trans-Saharan Highway, demonstrate the scale of China's infrastructure ambitions in the region, enhancing connectivity and boosting trade. These developments have generated employment opportunities and spurred short-term economic growth. However, they also risk leaving countries with unsustainable debt burdens and infrastructure that may serve Chinese strategic interests more than local needs. Environmental and social concerns have further complicated perceptions of China's role, with large-scale projects sometimes prioritizing economic output over ecological and community welfare (Cuscito, 2023).

The geopolitical significance of China's presence is amplified by the decline of Western influence, particularly that of France and the US, both of which face growing anti-Western sentiment. This has allowed Beijing to step in as an alternative partner, providing investment, arms, and diplomatic support while strengthening its position in multilateral forums. For the Sahel, this presents both opportunity and risk: Chinese capital has the potential to accelerate infrastructure development and economic growth, but without careful management, it may also entrench dependency, undermine sovereignty, and compromise long-term sustainable development. Several recent developmental studies evaluating the impact of Chinese Infrastructure Projects in the Sahel highlighted these concerns, indicating growing scrutiny over China's role and the long-term impacts of its investments in the region (Nantulya, 2025) (Rajosefa, 2023). The future of China's role in the Sahel will largely depend on the region's ability to navigate this relationship strategically, striking a balance between economic benefits and sovereign integrity, as well as sustainable development goals.

The Interplay of Geopolitical Interests in the Sahel

The Sahel region serves as a stage for a complex interplay of geopolitical interests involving major global powers such as the United States, France, and China, each pursuing distinct strategic agendas. While the US and France focus on security measures and counterterrorism efforts, China's involvement is primarily driven by economic interests. This divergence in strategic priorities can occasionally lead to tensions among these powers, but it also provides Sahel countries with unique opportunities to leverage these differences to their benefit. (Lebovich, 2024).

The US and France's security-oriented approach aims to combat racially and ethnically motivated violent extremist groups and stabilise the region, which aligns with their broader goals of maintaining influence and ensuring the safety of their investments, particularly in areas critical to energy and natural resources. On the contrary, China has capitalised on the opportunity to embed itself economically within the Sahel through massive infrastructure projects, investments in key sectors like mining and agriculture, and the establishment of robust trade relationships. These divergent approaches create a dynamic in which Sahel governments have the potential to negotiate terms that better serve their developmental and sovereignty needs, using the competition among these powers to extract more favorable deals and investments.

The involvement of external powers in the Sahel highlights a broader geopolitical competition and considerably impacts the region's stability and developmental trajectory. The strategic presence of the U.S., France, and China introduces a mix of challenges and opportunities. Each power brings different resources and strategic intents to the region, influencing local political landscapes, economic development, and regional stability. As these global powers advance their

respective interests, the primary challenge for the Sahel lies in navigating these complex relationships to enhance regional stability, drive economic growth, and foster greater self-sufficiency. Achieving these goals requires skilled diplomatic and strategic engagement from Sahel countries to ensure that the involvement of external powers translates into tangible benefits rather than perpetuating dependency or conflict. This delicate balance of managing external influences while prioritising internal priorities is crucial for the Sahel to harness its full potential and chart a path toward sustainable development and autonomy.

Sahelian Economies vs. Other Developing Regions in Africa

The Sahel region and the Horn of Africa share several economic characteristics, including heavy reliance on natural resources, agriculture, and external aid, as well as vulnerabilities to political instability, climate change, and security threats. There are many key differences in economic structures, growth trajectories, and resilience strategies. As discussed above, the Sahelian economies are largely resource-driven, heavily relying on gold, uranium, oil, and agriculture. Countries such as Mali, Niger, and Chad rely heavily on extractive industries, making them vulnerable to fluctuations in commodity prices. In contrast, the Horn of Africa economies or the peninsular eastern Africa, including Ethiopia, Somalia, and Djibouti, rely more on trade, logistics, and agriculture. Djibouti benefits from its strategic port location, while Ethiopia has focused on industrialization and infrastructure-led growth.

Both these African regions experience socio-political instability. However, the nature of conflict differs in both African regions. While the Sahel faces persistent racially and ethnically motivated extremist insurgencies, particularly in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso, which majorly disrupt economic activities, the Horn of Africa grapples with protracted civil conflicts (e.g., Ethiopia's Tigray War, Somalia's power struggle induced instability), but countries, like Kenya, somehow maintain relative stability, attracting more economic trade and investment. However, a part of the instability in Somalia is also driven by the persistent threat of extremism posed by al-Shabaab, an al-Qaeda-affiliated terrorist group that conducts attacks against government forces, civilians, and international peacekeeping missions (Agha, 2023). This has broader implications for the Horn of Africa, affecting regional security and economic stability. Neighbouring countries like Kenya and Ethiopia frequently contend with cross-border incursions and terrorism spillovers, while maritime piracy in the Gulf of Aden remains a lingering concern. The fragile governance structures in Somalia also hinder broader efforts for regional cooperation and development initiatives across the Horn of Africa.

According to the World Meteorological Organization (2024), African countries are losing 2–5% of their GDP annually due to climate extremes, with some diverting up to 9% of their budgets to disaster response. By 2030, an estimated 118 million people living in extreme poverty are expected to face increased exposure to droughts,

floods, and extreme heat if adequate adaptation measures are not implemented (World Meteorological Organization, 2024). This would worsen poverty levels and hinder economic growth, placing major strain on development efforts. The Sahel and Horn of Africa are no exception and are not immune to the effects of climate change, whether human-induced or otherwise. Both regions face climate-induced challenges, including desertification and droughts, which affect agricultural productivity. (Pichon (et. al.) 2024). The Sahel is at risk due to rapid desertification, while the Horn of Africa has faced recurrent droughts and locust infestations, which have severely impacted food security. Countries like Ethiopia and Kenya (in the Horn/East Africa) have invested in irrigation and climate-resilient agriculture.

In contrast, the Sahel remains lagging in adaptive infrastructure, despite initiatives such as the Great Green Wall project. Infrastructure and economic diversification are vital for both regions. While the Horn of Africa is advancing in connectivity, with Ethiopia leading industrialization efforts and Djibouti positioning itself as a logistics hub, the Sahel region remains heavily dependent on agriculture and mining, with limited industrial growth except, of course, for Senegal and Mauritania, which are leveraging hydrocarbons and renewables, signalling potential diversification. (World Meteorological Organization, 2024).

Last but not least, the Horn of Africa, like the Sahel region, is too deeply intertwined with the interests of global powers such as the US, China, and Gulf countries, primarily due to its strategic maritime importance. Military bases in Djibouti, operated by France, the US, and China, reflect the country's geopolitical significance and its impact on the region's economy.

While the Horn of Africa and the Sahel share varying degrees of underlying challenges, their trajectories are shaped by distinct geopolitical and economic dynamics. The Horn of Africa's maritime importance and ethnic conflicts make it a hotspot for regional rivalries and external interventions. In contrast, the Sahel's challenges are more tied to transnational terrorism (dominated by IS and AQ-linked groups), military takeovers, and resource-driven conflicts.

Strategic and Policy Recommendations for Sahel Development

A comparative view of the Sahel and the Horn of Africa highlights that addressing their interconnected security and economic challenges necessitates a balanced combination of regional cooperation, institutional reforms, and sustainable investments in governance and infrastructure. The absence of such measures risks deepening instability, worsening humanitarian crises, and derailing long-term socio-economic development. The Sahel, in particular, remains highly vulnerable, with its trajectory shaped by persistent insecurity, fragile governance, and an overdependence on natural resources. These conditions have constrained growth and eroded resilience

in the face of climate change, demographic pressures, and growing external competition.

To tackle these challenges, a forward-looking strategy can be recommended across three key areas: governance and institutions, regional and international cooperation, and economic diversification and sustainability.

1. Governance and Institutions

1.1. The Sahel's long-term development depends on strengthening governance and institutional capacity. Building the rule of law, fighting corruption, and enhancing administrative efficiency are crucial for creating an environment that fosters investment and sustainable growth.

1.2. Enhancing institutional performance will ensure better allocation of resources, more effective policy implementation, and greater accountability, which are critical for both domestic stability and external credibility.

2. Regional and International Cooperation

2.1. Regional and international collaboration is a cornerstone for addressing the Sahel's interconnected challenges. Platforms such as **ECOWAS, the Alliance of Sahel States (AES), and the G5 Sahel** provide frameworks for jointly tackling security threats, managing cross-border resources, and coordinating trade and infrastructure development. (Leonard et.al., 2025) (Klomegah, 2025).

2.2. By strengthening collective initiatives in areas such as trade facilitation and security coordination, Sahelian states can amplify their bargaining power in global affairs. At the same time, carefully managing international partnerships is vital to ensure that foreign engagement supports regional priorities while balancing the influence of external powers.

3. Economic Diversification and Sustainability

3.1. Economic diversification is crucial to move beyond the Sahel's dependence on agriculture and mining. Expanding into sectors such as manufacturing, services, and digital technology will strengthen resilience and reduce vulnerability to commodity shocks. Governments should create policies that incentivize investment, support small and medium enterprises (SMEs), and integrate local businesses into global value chains.

3.2. Equally important is the development of sustainable infrastructure in transport, energy, and water management, which underpins productivity and climate adaptability. Expanding renewable energy and climate-resilient agricultural practices will not only address environmental vulnerabilities but also generate jobs and foster inclusive, long-term growth.

Conclusion

The future of the Sahel region lies in a balanced approach that incorporates strategic internal development, prudent management of external influences, and enhanced regional cooperation. By adopting comprehensive strategies and policies that address immediate needs and long-term goals, the Sahel can transform its challenges into opportunities, paving the way for a more stable and prosperous future. The region, marked by its complex socio-economic and geopolitical landscape, stands at a critical juncture. This chapter has explored the intricate dynamics of the Sahel's economy, the role of external powers like China, the USA, and France, and the challenges and opportunities these elements present. The analyses underscore that while the Sahel faces substantial hurdles due to environmental degradation, political instability, and economic underdevelopment, there are also considerable opportunities for growth and transformation.

The involvement of external powers (including Russia or the European Union) has introduced resources and complexities to the Sahel's development equation. China's economic ventures, primarily through the BRI, have brought infrastructure, investment, and concerns regarding debt sustainability and sovereignty. Similarly, the security-focused engagements from France and the United States have helped counteract regional terrorism threats but have also sometimes overshadowed the broader development needs of the region. Strategic and balanced approaches are necessary for the Sahel to harness its full potential. This entails managing external influences through diplomatic and economic strategies, while also bolstering internal capabilities. Strengthening governance, investing in sustainable infrastructure, diversifying the economy, and enhancing human capital are critical steps toward building a resilient Sahel. The Sahel's trajectory will substantially depend on the region's ability to navigate its internal challenges while strategically engaging with external partners. Enhanced regional cooperation, effective resource management, and proactive policy-making are essential to converting the Sahel's potential into tangible progress and sustainable development.

For the Sahel, the path towards economic prosperity remains an uphill task. However, the region can achieve stability and economic prosperity with informed strategies and regional collaborative efforts. The global community's role, particularly that of key players such as China, the USA, and France, will be crucial in shaping the future of Sahel countries.

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PART II: GLOBAL AND NATIONAL RELATIONSHIPS WITH THE REGION

CHAPTER 4

European Union and The Sahel

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Abstract

The European Union is an active player in the Sahel region with regard to counter-terrorism activities. Thus, an overview of these activities is important from NATO's perspective as well, as NATO and the EU are strategic partners in CT. We analyse EU documents on the issue starting from 2005, when the EU's Counter Terrorism Strategy was born, through the region specific Strategy for Security and Development in the Sahel of 2011 and up to the EU Integrated Strategy in the Sahel of 2021. The present chapter is dedicated to the follow-up of these EU documents and analysing their aims and implementation in the framework of the security strategies of the EU, from the European Security Strategy of 2003 to the EU Global Strategy of 2016 and the Strategic Compass of 2022. The chapter also discusses EU-NATO cooperation on the issue, while examining EU engagement in light of NATO Counter-Terrorism Policy Guidelines. The geographical scope of the analysis includes Sahel states identified in the United Nations Integrated Strategy for the Sahel, widening the scope of the EU's Sahel strategy from just five countries to ten for the sake of a general understanding of EU actions in the region. The five countries, identified by the EU Sahel strategy are Mauritania, Mali and Niger, and the most affected neighbouring states, Burkina Faso and Chad. These countries had been in the centre of attention during the past decade due to the presence and activity of violent extremist groups in the region, and the abruptly ended French intervention, Operation Barkhane. Additionally, Cameroon, Gambia, Guinea, Nigeria and Senegal will be assessed, which fall under the 2014 EU Strategy on the Gulf of Guinea. This latter strategy will be also analysed in the light of EU CT activities. Thus, the chapter assesses EU CT activities in the ten Sahel states.

Keywords: *European Union counter terrorism activity in the Sahel, EU-NATO cooperation, EU Sahel strategy, EU Strategy on the Gulf of Guinea, EU counter terrorism strategy, counter terrorism*

Introduction

The European Union (EU) was involved for the first time in counter-terrorism in the 1976, with the formation of the TREVI (Terrorism, Radicalism, Extremism, and International Violence) Group (Tuček and Warnes, 2017: 319). The community then introduced its first security strategy following the 9/11 terrorist attack in the USA, but it was only the Madrid and London bombings in 2004 and 2005 which motivated the community to participate in the global fight against terrorism in a more dedicated manner (Argonamiz, 2009). Consequently, a common EU strategy on counter-terrorism (CT) was born in 2005. The strategy provides a general framework for EU action to prevent radicalisation, protect EU citizens and infrastructure, pursue and investigate both terrorists and their networks and provide adequate responses to the threat and its consequences. These four pillars, Prevent, Protect, Pursue and Respond, have remained relevant since the formulation of the strategy, which pointed out three focus regions originally, North Africa, the Middle East and South East Asia (Council of the European Union, 2005: 3-7). Although the security environment has changed since the release of the document, the EU did not renew it, but adopted Council conclusions on counter-terrorism on a regular basis to address the changing environment (EEAS, 2023). The first of these conclusions, adopted in 2015, put the Sahel on the map of EU CT action (Council of the European Union, 2015a).

The EU's engagement in the Sahel, however, has a long history, owing to presence of the former colonial powers within the organization, which wished to maintain relations with their former overseas territories (Vecsey, 2019). These ambitions led to a multifaceted EU engagement in the Sahel, which now is in accordance with the community's integrated and comprehensive approach, translating into a multi-dimensional, multi-phased, multi-level and multi-lateral approach to conflicts and crises (EEAS, 2016: 28-29). This complex engagement is thus not limited to counter-terrorism; that is just one dimension of it, supported by other strategies, policies and actions. The ten countries identified as the Sahel by the UNISS are dealt with by two different strategies from the EU's perspective. Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger are included in the EU's own Integrated Strategy in the Sahel, while Cameroon, Gambia, Guinea, Nigeria and Senegal, among other states, are considered under the EU Strategy on the Gulf of Guinea (GoG strategy). These two strategic areas were also addressed in the 2003 European Security Strategy, just as in the EU Counter-Terrorism Strategy (EUCTS). After the 2008 Implementation report of the European Security Strategy - Providing Security in a Changing World, events in

the Sahel indicated the EU's need of its own Sahel strategy, which was adopted in 2011, while three years later the strategy on the Gulf of Guinea followed.

This chapter is structured so as to examine EU documents to establish how EU CT engagement evolved in the ten Sahel countries, and how the EU actions resonate with NATO guidelines. For this the EU discourse on CT is analysed through official EU documents and strategies. After the general introduction of EU action in the domain, the community's interventions in the Sahel are considered. Finally, EU action is assessed through NATO guidelines, taking into consideration the three existing EU – NATO joint declarations.

1. The EU on Counter-Terrorism

In the first period of EU CT activities, between the formulation of the TREVI Group and the 9/11 attacks, the Community mainly dealt with terrorism at a national or bilateral level. The TREVI Group was specifically created because of increased terrorist activity within Europe and in response to the massacre of 11 Israeli athletes at the 1972 Munich Olympic Games (Tuček and Warnes, 2017: 319-320). In this phase, European ethno-nationalist and ideological terrorist groups posed the main threat to some Member States of the Community, like the Euskadi ta Askatasuna (Basque Homeland and Liberty, ETA) in Spain from 1959, the Irish Republican Army (IRA) in Northern Ireland from 1969, and the Rote Armee Faktion (Red Army Faction, RAF) in West Germany from 1970 (Kaunert, 2012: 579). The TREVI Group, being an informal organisation mainly for information sharing, did not have major influence on the Community's actions, but it certainly encouraged the formulation of more permanent structures for cooperation (Tuček and Warnes, 2017: 320; Özdilek, 2023: 59-60). Thus, the EU did not have a common agenda to address this threat, and kept counter-terrorism outside of the Treaty framework, especially because the intensity of the threat decreased in the 1970s and 80s (Argomaniz, 2009: 152-153). The TREVI structure was however included in the Treaty framework at the establishment of the EU, and the Maastricht Treaty placed it under its third pillar for Justice and Home Affairs (Tuček and Warnes, 2017: 320).

The terrorist attacks on the Twin Towers in 2001 however changed the EU discourse on the topic. The threat became global, and the EU also felt the urge to change its position on the issue. At the same time, it still handled terrorism as an external threat, rather than a challenge affecting the Community's internal security (Jackson, 2007: 237). The European Security Strategy (ESS) of 2003 indicated growing concerns related to terrorism, as the document listed it as one of the key new threats. The ESS also called for a concerted EU action to combat terrorism, and it identified the phenomenon as a complex threat, requiring an equally complex answer mechanism dealing with it, including intelligence, police, judicial and military means. The strategy was also committed to supporting third countries to combat terrorism,

which created the basis for the future EUCTS (Council of the EU, 2003: 5, 9, 14). Notwithstanding the release of the ESS, the EU only started to consider terrorism as an issue affecting both its internal and external security after the terrorist attacks in Madrid, when EU CT institutionalisation accelerated at notable speed (Jackson, 2007: 237; Argomaniz, 2009: 158). Just two weeks after the bombings the European Council adopted The Declaration on Combating Terrorism, which was the true opening of dedicated EU action in the area. The consequent bombings in London reinforced the EU's determination, and as a result, the EUCTS was released in 2005. The four pillars of the strategy set the required principles and provided a guideline for EU action, while institutionalisation made it possible in practice (Argomaniz, 2009: 158-161).

In neither of the documents did the EU discuss the Sahel as one of the regions to be addressed in the context of CT activities, instead, the documents emphasized threats that were the most imminent in the EU's immediate neighbourhood. This does not come as a surprise, since the Sahel region in the early 2000s was still considered a success story of democratisation (Stoddard, 2017: 470). Al-Qaeda, which was the EU's foremost concern in the early stages of CT related actions (Jackson, 2007: 236), was not yet a significant actor in West Africa. Algeria's infamous terrorist group, the al-Qaeda in the I Maghreb (AQIM) was only formed in 2006. That year most probably marks the time when the tide started to turn in the Sahel, and in the aftermath of the Arab Spring in 2011, extremism peaked in the region (Extremism spreads across West Africa and the Sahel, 2012). This suggestion is supported by the rapid increase of internet access in the Sahel during the time period, which made possible the expansion of formerly local terrorist organisations, like AQIM and Boko Haram (Besenyő and Sinkó, 2021: 67-68, 72)

1.1. The Re-evaluation of the Sahel

The increased activity of extremist groups across the Sahel, together with the EU's growing focus on the external nexus of terrorism led to the adoption of the Strategy for Security and Development in the Sahel in 2011. Although it is a regional strategy, the leitmotif of it is to address 'terrorist-linked security threats'. The strategy aims to eliminate these threats with enhanced political stability, good governance, general economic and social development, promoting a common regional strategy to tackle cross-border threats, strengthening the rule of law and preventing violent extremism and radicalisation in the target countries, namely Burkina Faso, Mali, Mauritania and Niger (Council of the European Union, 2011: 1-4). The Sahel strategy is in line with the EU CT document, as the EU offers assistance to the most vulnerable countries in the Sahel to combat terrorism. This assistance is mainly in the development area, and financed through two EU financial instruments, the Instrument for Stability, the European Development Fund, and, as a third financial source, Member State contributions (Council of the European Union, 2011: 8).

Concrete EU actions are identified in the annex of the strategy for the period of 2012-2020. These actions were building on existing EU engagement in the region, and relying on EU Delegations in the respective countries for coordination (Council of the European Union, 2011: 24-35). It is notable that even though the strategy aims to tackle terrorist-linked security threats, the action plan is more focused on migration related EU engagement in the region.

The 2011 Sahel strategy is important to EU CT engagement, since it created a clear link between the external and internal nexus of EU counter-terrorism. In the strategy, the EU identified the region's stability as pivotal to the EU's own internal security (Council of the European Union, 2011: 4; Sepherd, 2021: 742). This connection is a significant element of the EU discourse on external CT activities, since it led to the inclusion of the topic into the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) missions and operations were not initially designed to carry out CT related tasks, and for a long time they were indeed not involved in such activities. Although the institutionalisation of EU CT engagement started in 2005, only the Lisbon Treaty, which entered into force in 2009, made it possible to have counter-terrorism as the main objective of a CSDP mission (Argomaniz, 2009: 161; Monar, 2021: 641). As the transnational nature of terrorism was emphasised, the inclusion of CT action in CFSP and CSDP became more prevalent. The appearance of these tasks was not evident and generally they were not defined in the missions' mandates until some years after 2009 (Martins and Ferreira-Pereira, 2012: 544-546; Sepherd, 2021: 742-743).

The first CSDP mission designed explicitly to fight terrorism was EUCAP Sahel Niger launched in 2012 (Sepherd, 2021: 743). The mission of the EUCAP was 'to support the capacity building of the Nigerien security actors to fight terrorism and organised crime' (European Council, 2012: 48). At first the EU had been a reluctant actor when it came to addressing counter-terrorism. The community primarily linked the issue with development, as it is clear from the strategies in which the 10 countries of the Sahel appear (Baldaro and Strazzari, 2023: 3). The established link between the emerging terrorist threat in the Sahel, and the EU's internal security (Sepherd, 2021: 742), however, made it possible for the EU to address the question in the security-development nexus, utilising the Union's previous experiences in peacekeeping (Baldaro and Strazzari, 2023: 3). The result of this approach was three deployed CSDP missions, one of them being EUCAP Sahel Niger, two functional support cells, and a fourth mission that was established before the end of 2024. This latter effort, however, was affected by the military takeovers in the Central Sahel area (Baldaro and Strazzari, 2023: 8). EUTM Mali was launched in 2013 with the aim of supporting the Malian Armed Forces, restoring their capacity and enabling them to re-establish the country's territorial integrity and reduce the threat of terrorism (European

Council, 2013: 20; Molnár and Vecsey, 2022: 69). EUCAP Sahel Mali was initiated on in 2014, and the mission started operating in 2015. Even though EUCAP Sahel Mali is a civilian mission, it also includes the EU's aim to support Malian authorities in their fight against terrorism (European Council, 2014: 21). This latter mission was in 2019 complemented with the EU Regional Advisory and Coordination Cell for the Sahel (RACC). Counter-terrorism was not explicitly included in the RACC's tasks, but contribution to EU intelligence and situational awareness on the topic was added (European Council, 2019: 19). In 2023, the EU established its EU Military Partnership Mission in Niger (EUMPM Niger), an ill-fated mission, which came to an abrupt end with the military coup in Niger in 2023 (Baldaro and Strazzari, 2023: 4-5). The primary mission of the EUMPM was to support the host country in its fight against terrorism (European Council, 2022: 87). The last CSDP mission which was deployed was the Security and Defence Initiative in support of West African countries of the Gulf of Guinea, which did not include any reference to the support of counter-terrorism activities in the area of operation. The support cell is to contribute to the capacity building of armed forces, address good governance and promote human rights (European Council, 2023: 26-27). With the deployment of a CSDP mission to the Central Sahel, the EU started to utilise the entirety of its toolbox to carry out CT activities.

1.2. *The EU as a counter-terrorism actor in the Sahel*

Although in its 2003 security strategy the EU already defined itself as a global player, but it defined the Union's neighbourhood as the area of strategic interest (Council of the EU, 2003: 9). With the externalisation of different areas, such as counter-terrorism, over time the EU widened the narrowly defined ring around itself for engagement. Thus, after addressing extremism in the Central Sahel, the Union ventured even further, creating the EU Strategy on the Gulf of Guinea in 2014. The geographical scope of this document better reflects the EU's claim of being a global actor, since it includes the entire coastline stretching from Senegal to Angola, including Cameroon, Gambia, Guinea, Nigeria and Senegal with that definitely exceeding the communicated strategic interest in 2003 focusing on the EU's neighbourhood area.

The GoG strategy included the same linkage between internal and external security of the EU, as well as considering terrorist activities as the main threat in the region, just as in the Sahel strategy. Four specific objectives were identified in the document: firstly, building common understanding of the threat at hand; secondly, institutional development and capability building to ensure maritime awareness, security and rule of law; thirdly, supporting economic development and social resilience; and fourthly, strengthening regional cooperation (Council of the European Union, 2014: 1-3). An action plan followed the strategy in 2015 to provide the details of EU engagement in the sub-region. According to the Action Plan for the period on

2015-2020, the focus was clearly on the second objective of the strategy, as it had listed 27 actions to achieve the set objective, including regional and national level coordination, information sharing, technological support and the development of national legal frameworks. The appointed EU actors responsible for the implementation of these actions were the Commission, the European External Action Service and the EU Military Staff (Council of the European Union, 2015b: 30-33).

The GoG Action Plan reflected on the first review of the EUCTS, released in 2015. First of all, the document included the Sahel and the Gulf of Guinea as areas where EU external engagement is needed to complement national efforts. In these two areas, EU action was deemed urgent. The review identified five key areas of EU engagement: diplomacy, capacity building, preventing radicalisation, enhancing international cooperation and addressing ongoing crises (Council of the European Union, 2015a). While the document complements the EUCTS in light of the security situation, its main points remain essentially the same, the strategy remains reactive, and reliant upon preparedness and emergency planning (Baker-Beall and Mott, 2021: 713). The GoG Action Plan follows suit with its key areas being diplomacy and coordination within the region to develop a common understanding of the threat, capacity building to establish multi-agency institutions in the respective countries, economic development to address youth unemployment and prevent radicalisation, and the enhancement of regional cooperation structures (Council of the European Union, 2015b).

The 2015 council conclusions on the topic admits that a new approach is needed for more effective EU CT engagement to successfully address ongoing crises and radicalisation (Council of the European Union, 2015a). The EU's Shared Vision, Common Action - A Stronger Europe; A Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy (EUGS) introduced the anticipated new approach in 2016. The EU's comprehensive approach to conflicts and crises was complemented with the four multis of the integrated approach: multi-dimensional, multi-phased, multi-level and multi-lateral. This new element emphasised the security-development nexus more prominently, and widened the scope of CSDP action. With the comprehensive approach the EU already had a cross sector engagement in the Sahel related to counter-terrorism, which was integrated as well, and meant to be able to utilise EU actions in every phase of a conflict. This step also brought the EU closer to a pre-emptive strategy, rather than continuing the existing reactive attitude.

The EUGS again re-emphasised the internal external security nexus of counter-terrorism, promoting further EU engagement in the field (Monar, 2021: 635). The strategy lists terrorism as one of the main transnational threats to the EU, also admitting that 'home-grown' terrorism still exists, and acknowledging the growing threat to the EU other than international violent extremism (EEAS, 2016: 21). The

EUGS approached the threat from the development nexus (Baldaro and Strazzari, 2023: 3), through cooperation, diplomatic relations, and multiple policy areas, like education (EEAS, 2016: 21), and drawn from the EUCTS with an increased focus towards external dimension of terrorism (Monar, 2021: 636). The EUGS also refers to the need of “addressing cross-border dynamics” in West Africa and the Sahel (EEAS, 2016: 35), which is not an explicit reference to terrorism or violent extremism; however, these threats are highly likely to be understood to be under this definition because of their transnational nature. This is even more the case, since the second revision of the EUCTS in 2020 used the same expression in relation to the Sahel (Council of the European Union, 2020: 5). The reviewed strategy also broke with its former reactive approach, and it became more pre-emptive in its nature than before (Baker-Beall and Mott, 2021: 715). The main difference between these two approaches was that the first is a response to events, and connected to resilience, which was the leitmotif of the EU’s strategy during Federica Mogherini’s term from 2014 to 2019 as High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Vice-President of the European Commission (HR/VP) (Wagner and Anholt, 2016; Tocci, 2020). The second means that the EU wishes to prevent future events from happening (Baker-Beall and Mott, 2021: 715). This approach agrees more with the realist turn, which occurred in the EU’s foreign policy, and was also embraced by Josep Borrell, the following HR/VP (Tánczos and Mező, forthcoming).

The change in the approach towards EU CT action shows in two particular instants. The first, the prevention of radicalisation was included in the 2005 EUCTS, but was reinforced in 2020. The second, the EU stressed the importance of dealing with the financing of terrorism under the newly added *Anticipate* element in EU CT action (Baker-Beall and Mott, 2021: 716-717). Besides the pre-emptive turn, the 2020 review also elevated the Sahel to one of the key regions of EU CT action. The document even stated that the reinforcement of EU presence is desirable (Council of the European Union, 2020: 5). While the EU still understood radicalisation and terrorism as a development issue (Council of the European Union, 2020: 1), in the case of the Sahel securitisation has also occurred. The EU’s different approach towards the Sahel can be explained through the general approach towards the region. It was assessed that the fragile states of the Sahel are not just inclined to be politically unstable, but also vulnerable to penetration by terrorist groups (Baldaro and Strazzari, 2023: 3-4). This approach was justified when the Tuareg insurgency started in Mali in 2012, followed by the infiltration and formation of other terrorist organisations, and a military coup in 2013 (Vecsey, 2015: 117-118). Since then, problems have mounted in the Central Sahel, and generally in Africa itself, which resulted in multiple attempted and successful coups d’état from 2020 (Wilén, 2024: 253). Amidst increasing insecurity in the Sahel and the COVID pandemic, the second set of council conclusions on the EUCTS was followed by the renewal of the EU’s Sahel strategy.

1.3. *Back to square one: putting development in the focus*

The European Union's Integrated Strategy in the Sahel (EUISS) was introduced in 2021, to address the deteriorating security situation in the Sahel, and reinforce the Union's commitment to its partners. The strategy also widened its geographical scope, five countries were considered as the key area of interest (Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger) but, additionally, this time the EU included the GoG countries so as to be able to effectively tackle the cross-border phenomena (Council of the European Union, 2021: 2-5). The EUISS completely reshaped the lines of EU engagement in the Sahel, therefore. Since the formulation of the first strategy the region's security had declined sharply. Terrorist activity dramatically increased in the region from the 2010s (Issaev et al., 2022: 413; Besenyő, Barten, De Cauwer, Tin and Gulyás, 2023: 239), and its relations to France, the major EU Member State actor in the region became increasingly tense (Tánczos and Fejérdy, 2024: 36). These developments led to the complete reformulation of the EU approach to security threats in the Sahel. While the former strategy focussed on counter-terrorism in the region, by 2021 it became clear that the securitised approach involving military action was not an adequate answer to the complex crises in the region (Pichon and Betant-Rasmussen, 2021: 6). Thus, the new strategy almost completely left out references to addressing terrorism and violent extremism. It became more focussed on development, namely governance, human rights, social inclusion and anti-corruption action, seeking long-term answers to regional insecurities (Baldaro and Strazzari, 2023: 4). The complex crises in the Sahel needed comprehensive EU action, thus in line with the EUGS the Union applied its integrated approach to the region. Even if this seems an improvement to EU engagement, the strategy in reality lost its focus. The Union aimed to address every issue in the Sahel, which was an unachievable objective. In light of subsequent events the EUISS came one year too early to provide an up to date long term strategy on EU action in the Sahel.

1.4. *When life overrides strategies*

In 2022, the Russian aggression in Ukraine changed the EU's security environment dramatically. The new strategic framework of the Union, the Strategic Compass, although nearly ready to be released when the war broke out, was rewritten in a short time in a major way to react to the war. The Strategic Compass thus referred to a war at the EU's borders, and obviously considered it the major security threat, while recognising that terrorism and violent extremism also remained in the forefront of the Union's thinking (Council of the European Union, 2022a: 8). This unwavering attention to terrorism since 2001 is the result of one simple fact. During the process leading to the creation of the Strategic Compass, EU Member States were asked for contributions to the new grand strategy, and based on the aggregated threat

assessment landscape, there was only one threat on which all Member States were in agreement on, according to their national security strategies. This threat was terrorism (Fiott, 2020: 6). It is thus no surprise that counter-terrorism is present in two sections of the Strategic Compass's four main parts. In its "Secure" chapter the Strategic Compass pledged to review all EU tools related to counter-terrorism by 2023, including the EUCTS. According to the EU's intentions, the strategy was to remain preemptive, focusing still on the financing of terrorism along with cooperation with international partners on the issue (Council of the European Union, 2022a: 25, 28).

In the fourth, 'Partner' chapter the document declares a continued and enhanced support for African partners to address terrorism, and to further strengthen the security domain by increasing the number of CT experts at EU Delegations (Council of the European Union, 2022a: 43, 46).

Council conclusions on counter-terrorism were released again in 2022. It reinforced the commitments of the Strategic Compass. The document considered the terrorist threat in the Sahel the most concerning, with a possible spill-over into other parts of West Africa, including the Gulf of Guinea region. Besides mentioning, and considering the wider West Africa region regarding the EU's CT activities, the document kept the priorities and key areas of engagement of the previous revision. The turn towards good governance remained an important part of CT action, and the pre-emptive element of addressing the financing of terrorism was also kept within the scope of the document. In order to expand the EU's role as a global counter-terrorism actor, it pledged to utilise the full extent of its CSDP toolbox (Council of the European Union, 2022b). The council conclusions released in 2024 were the reinforcement of the previous document, which lists the tasks and responsibilities of different EU bodies and representatives related to CT action. One of these was tasked to the HR/VP, to increase synergies between CSDP missions and operations and other relevant EU actors on CT action (Council of the European Union, 2024)

2. EU – NATO joint declarations and countering terrorism

Relations between the EU and the NATO were formalised in 2002 with a joint declaration, emphasising the strategic partnership designed around crisis management. After that, for a long time it was a dormant partnership, which was revived by the illegal annexation of the Crimea in 2014 and the continuous threat of terrorist attacks, amongst other issues. This resulted in both organisations straying into each other's traditional territories (Lațici, 2020: 2-3). As a result, in 2016 the EU and the NATO signed a joint declaration. The wording of the short document reflects the main motifs of the EUGS, released just two weeks before. It strongly emphasises the two communities' role to strengthen resilience. Even though it mentions the challenges and threats coming from the South and the East, the declaration does not identify counter-terrorism as an area of cooperation (Joint Declaration, 2016).

The two organisations' warming to each other was already shown in the EUGS, where the EU endorsed cooperation with the military block (EEAS, 2016). By 2020, when the second revision of the EUCTS was released, cooperation on counter-terrorism also made its way into EU-NATO relationship, as the organisation was mentioned in the review as well (Council of the European Union, 2020). The addition occurred in December 2017, when counter-terrorism was added to the existing areas of the strategic cooperation (Clapp, 2023: 1). This is the reason why the first two implementation reports on the common proposals do not include any reference to this particular area. The following, third report, however, included the term with the intent on the EU's and NATO's part to cooperate in the field in the framework of a global forum (Third Progress Report, 2018).

Accordingly, the second EU – NATO joint declaration listed cooperation on counter-terrorism as an item in the need of implementation and progress in the particular field. The declaration also welcomed NATO efforts undertaken in collective defence, crisis management and cooperative security in the Euro-Atlantic area, through the contribution to counter-terrorism (among deterrence and defence, and projecting stability) (Joint Declaration, 2018).

Progress reports in 2018 included counter-terrorism related paragraphs related to the work done. In the fourth report the most prominent achievement was the establishment of informal staff-level contacts (Fourth Progress Report, 2019). In the fifth report achievements in the field of information sharing and dialogue in the field of counter-terrorism were deemed important (Fifth Progress Report, 2020), and this remained the case in the following reports, nine of which were released by until the end of 2024.

The third, and so far, the last EU – NATO Joint Declaration was dominated by the war in Ukraine. Meanwhile, terrorism remained a threat in the EU's neighbourhood because of the region's insecurity and political fragility. The declaration also reported on noticeable results in the field of counter-terrorism, yet the document also acknowledged again the prevalence of terrorist groups and the threat they pose to both organisations (Joint Declaration, 2023).

But EU – NATO cooperation on counter-terrorism does not have visible practical results considering the EU's engagement in the Sahel. What might be invisible for the researchers is the information sharing between the two organisations, which may result in daily tactical level wins: however, deriving the nature of the shared information remains undetectable.

Conclusions

EU CT action came a long way since the formulation of the TREVI group through to the review of the EUCTS in 2024. The EU's approach changed in line with the Union's grand strategy, represented first by the ESS, then the EUGS and finally in 2022 by the Strategic Compass (and we are expecting the White Paper on the Future of European Defence in March 2025). All of these strategies provided their guidance for the EU's CT activities, which remained highly responsive to the security situation as well. Starting as a reluctant actor, by the time of the release of the EUGS the EU was an aspiring global actor in the field of counter- terrorism. The approach of the 2005 EUCTS also changed from a reactive strategy to more of a pre-emptive document, mainly putting the focus on the prevention of radicalisation and the financing of terrorism. These elements were also specific in EU CT activity in the Sahel.

While securitisation of EU action occurred slowly over time, it was prominent in the Sahel even before the 'realist turn' was implemented in the EUGS. CSDP efforts addressing terrorism and violent extremism was started as early as 2012, and only ceased due to increased insecurity and a practical EU withdrawal from the Central Sahel, where these missions, the EUCAP Sahel Niger, EUTM Mali, EUCAP Sahel Mali, RACC and the EUMPM Niger were deployed. Of these missions, only two are still operating at the time of the writing, EUCAP Sahel Mali, and the RACC. In light of development-focussed Sahel strategies, the violent military takeovers in the Sahel might lead us to believe that EU engagement can be easily dismissed as unsuccessful. However, the scale and scope of the EU actions show that with dedication to local ownership in the target countries could have resulted in a different outcome.

In the meantime, the African continent, and within it the Sahel, and increasingly the Gulf of Guinea remains an area of strategic concern for the EU. How the new security situation is going to be addressed can be predicted, even though the HR/VP just changed on 1 December 2024, when Kaja Kallas took over from Josep Borrell. In light of the security situation in the EU's neighbourhood (i.e. the war in Ukraine), it is not a surprise that the EU opted for an HR/VP from Estonia. Kallas' European Parliament hearing has also shown that she is at least committed to the realist turn executed by Borrell (European Parliament, 2024). It is, however, debateable whether she will be as committed to security in the Sahel as her predecessors were. The new HR/VP still reigns over a policy area which is governed with the characteristics of shared competences; however, EU institutions have a limited role in decision-making. Thus, mainly the EU Member States and their interests shape the Union's Common Foreign and Security Policy. In the case of the Sahel, France was the leading element for EU action. With the military takeovers in the Central Sahel, and in consequence the deteriorated ties of the region with Paris lost the EU its most powerful, strategy-

forming Member State in the geopolitical game in the Sahel, but its level of involvement was downsized. Other Member States, like Germany, Italy and Hungary started to turn towards the region, but they cannot replace France even in the long-term, due to their lack of historical embeddedness in the region. Moreover, recent security related developments in the Sahel left the EU in at least a confusion. The Union's decades-long engagement in the Sahel, (development aid, capability building and military interventions among others) resulted in seemingly little success. This most likely will lead to the re-evaluation of EU engagement in the Sahel in the mid-term, which may result in a new EU Sahel strategy.

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PART II: GLOBAL AND NATIONAL RELATIONSHIPS WITH THE REGION

CHAPTER 5

NATO's Role in the Sahel: Projecting Stability?

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Abstract

For decades, intensifying relations in the Southern Flank of NATO reflect a focus on developing partnerships and structured frameworks (such as Mediterranean Dialogue), as well as tailored programs countering various transnational challenges (such as terrorism). Yet still the relations of Sahel countries and NATO is more characterized by occasional cooperation as few Sahel countries are involved in multinational cooperation frameworks, even though North Africa in a wider sense, and the Sahel in particular have become regions of interest – and concern – for NATO and many respective member states since the ‘Arab Spring’. The reason for this is that state institutions in many countries of the Sahel have become ever more fragile, and a shift to radicalization and non-democratic governance has been observed. External pressures, such as the effects of climate change and the interference of extra-regional actors, as well as internal dynamics, such as an increasing population, lagging economic prospects, etc. have been identified as a complex set of drivers of various challenges and threats by NATO. This research relies on extensive analysis underpinned by NATO’s Strategic Foresight Analysis and the work undertaken by NATO Southern Hub – besides wide-ranging scholarly literature and policy analysis. Following an overview of multi-dimensional security and threat analysis for the Sahel countries for the 2020-2030s as an introduction, the assessment of NATO’s policies and activities on the ground that aim at tackling some of these challenges follow. The case study of Mauritania provides an in-depth look at what the realistic scope of cooperation in the Sahel currently entails. It is also important to keep a critical understanding of NATO’s activities, as societal perceptions in the Sahel often connect these to postcolonial interference. Thus, the chapter concludes with forward looking policy recommendations regarding how NATO and its member states could project stability to the Sahel in a more tailored and effective way.

Keywords: NATO, Sahel, projecting stability, Southern neighborhood, terrorism, strategy

Introduction

The complex challenges of the Sahel can be approached in various frameworks, like the security-development nexus; human security and the United Nation's development agenda, including the Millennium Development Goals / Agenda 2030; or the functionality of states in terms of ensuring livelihoods and delivering basic services, including security versus the 'fragility' of these states, as defined by the Fragile States Index. These are complementary approaches that bring us closer to understanding the complexity of problems, offer not only conceptual frameworks, but also both qualitative and quantitative tools for the assessment of 'instability'. Instability has been the key overriding feature of the Sahel region for decades and is likely to remain so in the foreseeable future (Osland & Erstad, 2020).

For decades intensifying relations with the Southern neighborhood of NATO look back to a background of developing partnerships and structured frameworks (such as Mediterranean Dialogue since 1994), and tailored programs countering various transnational challenges, such as terrorism (Loertscher et al., 2022). Still, the relation of Sahel countries and NATO is more often characterized by occasional cooperation as few Sahel countries are involved in multinational cooperation frameworks, even though North Africa in a wider sense, and more specifically the Sahel have become regions of interest – and concern – for NATO and many respective member states since the 'Arab Spring' (Piombo, Kallel & Englebert, 2024). The reason for this is that state institutions in many countries have become ever more fragile, and a shift to radicalization and non-democratic governance can be observed. External pressures, such as the effects of climate change and the interference of extra-regional actors, as well as internal dynamics, such as an increasing population boom, lagging economic prospects, etc. have been identified as a complex set of drivers to various challenges and threats by NATO.

Since such challenges and threats from the Sahel region are mostly of transnational nature and cross-cutting regarding their origin and the possibilities of tackling them, NATO's activities should be approached in a similarly holistic way, laying out the societal, political, economic, environmental and military drivers of instability. Fragile states and vulnerable societies pose significantly different challenges to NATO crisis management in the South than collective defense-related military threats from the East.

This research relies on quantitative and qualitative analysis based on NATO's Strategic Foresight Analysis process and the work undertaken by NATO Southern Hub – as well wide-ranging scholarly literature and policy analysis. The chapter is

structured along two main areas: first, an overview of multi-dimensional security and threat analysis for the Sahel countries for the 2020-2030s; second, an assessment of NATO's policies and activities on the ground that aim at tackling some of these. Meanwhile, it is also important to maintain a critical understanding of these activities, as societal perceptions in the Sahel often connect these to postcolonial interference. Thus, the chapter concludes with forward looking policy recommendations regarding how NATO and its member states could project stability to the Sahel in a more tailored and effective way in the decade to come.

1. Methodology

Methodologically, the chapter is based on a strategic threat assessment of the Sahel region from NATO's perspective, because the alliance's engagement and goals with the region must be based on foreseeable threats and challenges. Even though the alliance's most commonly used analytical framework is known as PMESII, including Political, Military, Economic, Social, Infrastructure and Information factors (NATO 2022a), there are many alternative versions of such applied assessments. This chapter primarily relies on the NATO Strategic Foresight Analysis (NATO 2023), accompanied by the Regional Perspectives Report on North Africa and the Sahel (NATO 2020), which included similar, but not exactly the same – political, human, technological, economic and environmental – factors. In addition, military factors are assessed to highlight particular threats and challenges to security and defense. These findings, accompanied by scholarly analysis provide for a regional threat assessment based on which the Sahel had been identified as a (sub)region of concern for NATO and its member states. In the latter parts of the chapter, this assessment also establishes that allies will need to sustain long-term attention and engagement with the Sahel countries, prompting policy recommendations for such engagement in the 2020s and 2030s.

NATO's engagement can be outlined chronologically based on the official sources of the alliance. Even though NATO established the Mediterranean Dialogue as a strategic partnership framework towards its Southern neighborhood in 1994, out of the ten Sahel countries examined here, only Mauritania joined the framework (in 1995). Based on this partnership, NATO established a tailored and structured partnership with Mauritania within its Defense and Related Security Capacity Building Initiative (DCB) in 2022. However, the other nine of the ten Sahel countries – Senegal, Gambia, Guinea, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Chad, Cameroon and Nigeria – are not bound to NATO through such strategic frameworks, limiting the direct influence or support NATO can offer or exert upon them. This is a consequence of two main factors: first, such partnerships are request-driven (as in the case of Mauritania); and second,

the Sahel countries are on the verge of NATO's action radius²⁴, at the outer perimeter of its Southern Neighborhood, south of the North African partner countries, (with which NATO has more direct strategic engagement). Therefore, this chapter has a methodological limitation in terms of the Sahel countries examined, with an analytical focus on NATO–Mauritania relations as a case study. At the same time, the case study approach allows for identifying already working practices in a Sahel country, serving as the basis of policy recommendations for the future.

2. The vulnerabilities of the Sahel out to 2040 and future scenarios

The regional strategic foresight analysis for the Sahel conducted by NATO experts in 2020, spanning the next two decades, identified 21 main trends in 5 overarching themes with 36 wide-ranging implications to human, national and international security, as summarized in the NATO Regional Perspectives Report on North Africa and the Sahel (NATO 2020: 48-49). As the foresight analysis did not single out the military dimension, even though this is the most determining factor for NATO, the military themes' trends and implications need to be added as a sixth component.

These themes, trends and implications, along which the strategic environment is expected to evolve, already highlight important conclusions for us. First, the trends and their implications fold out in a wide spectrum of themes, causing structural deficiencies and challenges to all countries across the region. Second, most of these structural challenges are non-military both in their nature and in their implications. Particularly, threats to human security have played and will continue to play a determining role in the Sahel. As such, NATO, as a political-military alliance, is not best suited to tackling them. Indeed, global and regional organizations, such as the United Nations, the African Union, the European Union, and subregional partners, such the G5 Sahel or ECOWAS have broader portfolios, including political, development and security agendas that might be more welcome by countries of the Sahel than the North Atlantic alliance (Besenyő 2021). Third, geopolitical and security developments underscore the persistence of various divisions in the Sahel, threatening regional stability and even the territorial unity of some countries. Raw material, energy, security and political drive many of these divisions, as well the interest of external actors in increasing their influence, and even creating direct presence here, indirectly or directly challenging NATO member states' interests.

Along with these drivers, a range of – mostly negative – scenarios were outlined, as NATO experts also developed scenarios for North Africa and the Sahel up to 2040. From amongst these, the most likely scenario is centered around the effects of climate change (food and water insecurity, scarcity of grazing and arable land) and

²⁴ NATO's 20 years of engagement in Afghanistan as its most notable 'out-of-area' operation ran within an action radius of 7,000 kilometers (Brussels – Kabul), which is proportionate with the distance to the Sahel countries (5,000-7,000 kilometers).

a population boom, coupled with urbanization challenges (slums and 'shanty towns') and inadequate infrastructure (railways, roads, housing, public services). Various concepts of extremism are expected to be widely incorporated into governmental and legal systems, along with the adoption of principles of Sharia law. Fundamentalism and extremism will fuel political instability and threats to domestic security in many countries, while 'it is likely that an DAESH-like organization or a network of affiliated or sympathetic extremist groups will have control of some territory in the Sahel' (NATO 2020, 44.), increasing the threat of terrorism to the strategic level for Europe. Increased irregular migration from the Sahel to North Africa (and beyond) will further contribute to instability. Not only intra-regional dynamics, but external pressure will strain relations in the region: economic competition for natural resources, investments and access to markets among external powers like China, Russia, the United States, European and Middle Eastern powers such as the United Arab Emirates will intensify. In this competition, China is likely to extend and strengthen its control of transportation infrastructure, as well as Chinese opportunities for influencing national governments. Meanwhile, the influence and presence of European powers and the United States is to decrease, at least militarily, and most likely politically as well, and possibly even economically. In the 2030s North Africa and the Sahel will be an expeditionary 'testbed' for the Chinese military and the presence of Russian, and possibly also other private military companies that can gain leverage both on internal disputes for power and resources. Thus, spreading instability and supporting opposing stakeholders to NATO's interests can create not only occasional intense crises, but a constant high-intensity pressure in the Southern neighborhood.

Besides the most likely scenario summarized here, NATO's foresight modelling also outlined ten alternatives across a wide variety of cases in which one or more influencing drivers become dominant and create lower probability but high-impact scenarios. These are the following (NATO 2020, 45–46.):

- Alternative 1: Through significant economic growth and development driven by external investment and technological advancement, countries of the region become better positioned to tackle challenges of population growth, climate change, infrastructure and food shortage, and improve access to education and healthcare, generally improving the conditions of human security.
- Alternative 2: 'Arab Spring 2.0' causing widespread social unrest and protests across the region, with outcomes ranging from desired changes in the political systems to causing the collapse of governments and leaving behind fragile or a Libya-style failing states.
- Alternative 3: A new DAESH-like violent extremist organization seizes control of territory, declaring a caliphate, obtaining control over military forces, infrastructure and natural resources in one or more countries.

- Alternative 4: In a generally deteriorating human security situation (born out of population growth, urbanization, water and food insecurity, and scarce access to healthcare) a new major pandemic sweeps the Sahel killing hundreds of thousand or even millions of people.
- Alternative 5: Due to cross-border tensions and interference, or territorial disputes bound to natural resources (water or oil), an interstate conflict erupts between two or more countries in the region.
- Alternative 6: External actors ignite a proxy war (for example over natural resources) in the region exploiting local religious or ethnic fault lines, in a Yemen-like scenario.
- Alternative 7: The growing investment of China in transportation infrastructure, gaining control of natural resources, and investment in manufacturing across the region can lead to the 'economic colonization' of the Sahel, if coupled with a European and U.S. abandonment.
- Alternative 8: Pressures affecting the fragility of some Sahel countries (particularly Mali, Niger and Chad) can result in the fracturing of these countries or in secessionist tendencies along ethnic (tribal), or religious lines. Coupled with the direct or indirect military expansion of China or Russia by establishing new naval or air bases, leading to the deployment of anti-access/area-denial and intelligence capabilities, such development might pose security challenges to NATO's South.
- Alternative 9: Extreme effects of climate change and resulting increases in temperature and drought exacerbate existing problems of population growth, urbanization, food and water scarcity, and migration, causing widespread humanitarian crisis and possibly triggering international response.
- Alternative 10: Any combination of the scenarios outlined above would likely cause extreme migration events (possibly adding millions of internally displaced persons and refugees to current movements) in the region from the Sahel to North Africa and then further on towards Europe.

The most likely scenario outlined above indicates negative developments centered around three main factors: terrorism through strengthening fundamentalism and extremist groups; increased irregular migration through environmental, socio-economic pressures and military-security crises; and the challenging presence of opposing great powers. Even if the more extreme scenarios and severe crises could be avoided, NATO would still have a vested interest in tackling these challenges throughout the 2020s and 2030s. The question is: How? The following sections will map out how NATO's relations have been developing with the Southern Neighborhood

through a case study for the Sahel, Mauritania, and identify the lessons learnt from these exercises in cooperative security.

3. Developing NATO's partnership with the Southern Neighborhood

Amongst NATO's core tasks, relations with the Southern Neighborhood are built along the principles of cooperative security by using the tool of developing partnerships. This is so, because regional ownership is an indispensable condition for success. As Iratni (2008) pointed out, countries of the region had no direct contact with the alliance from gaining independence until the end of the Cold War, because the North Atlantic Alliance was regarded as a military instrument backing up colonial domination in the wider Maghreb. In the 1990s NATO's strategic considerations extended beyond the East–West divide, encompassing threats like the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD), terrorism, irregular migration, and regional instability in a general sense, the Mediterranean gradually gaining increasing attention. This was primarily driven by the southern member states of NATO, becoming an integral part of allied strategic considerations through the establishment of various bi- and multilateral partnership initiatives (like Mediterranean Dialogue). This was also incorporated into Strategic Concepts and summit declarations, as early as in 1991. As the 1991 NATO Strategic Concept foreshadowed a partially shifting strategic focus:

“The Allies also wish to maintain peaceful and non-adversarial relations with the countries in the Southern Mediterranean and Middle East. The stability and peace of the countries on the southern periphery of Europe are important for the security of the Alliance, as the 1991 Gulf war has shown. This is all the more so because of the build-up of military power and the proliferation of weapons technologies in the area, including weapons of mass destruction and ballistic missiles capable of reaching the territory of some member states of the Alliance.” (NATO 1991, Art. 11.)

At the end of the decade, the 1999 NATO Strategic Concept already reflected both the heightened interest and the expanding foundations of partnership with the Southern Neighborhood:

“The Mediterranean is an area of special interest to the Alliance. Security in Europe is closely linked to security and stability in the Mediterranean. NATO's Mediterranean Dialogue process is an integral part of NATO's cooperative approach to security. It provides a framework for confidence building, promotes transparency and cooperation in the region, and reinforces and is reinforced by other international efforts. The Alliance is committed to developing progressively the political, civil, and military aspects of the Dialogue with the aim of achieving closer cooperation with, and more active involvement by, countries that are partners in this Dialogue.” (NATO 1999, Art. 38.)

Mediterranean Dialogue (MD) was launched in December 1994 through the invitation of six partner countries from the wider MENA region, including Mauritania of the Sahel. The core principles of the dialogue are non-discrimination, self-differentiation, two-way engagement, non-imposition, diversity, and complementarity to other international initiatives in the region. In practical terms, it is based on two pillars: political dialogue and practical cooperation. Political dialogue became more structured with the establishment of the Mediterranean Cooperation Group in April 1997 although relations remained primarily bilateral with the participating countries.

The areas of practical cooperation have been the fight against terrorism and WMD proliferation, crisis management, defense reform and armed forces' cooperation. Such cooperation included information sharing on terrorism, tactical level training and education on peacekeeping, arms control, and civil-military cooperation (Iratni 2008, 56–58). Later, some of the MD countries began contributing to NATO stabilization operations as well, like Morocco to IFOR and SFOR. The maritime monitoring mission Operation Active Endeavour, with a special focus on preventing terrorism and the movement of weapons of mass destruction, further extended military-to-military cooperation with Morocco. Other countries in the region, however, have exercised more restraint in deepening ties with NATO, and the Sahel countries even more so, being situated at the outer perimeter of NATO's geographical area of interest (NATO 2024a).

As partnership frameworks evolved, NATO and MD partner countries developed their bilateral relations along more focused national programs driven by the identified needs of the partner countries, currently called the Individually Tailored Partnership Program, which is agreed upon a consultative basis every four years. Cooperation areas also expanded in line with the changing nature of threats to include the protection of critical energy infrastructure, missile defense, cyber security and tackling illegal migration, among others. Practical cooperation is centered around security sector reform, the modernization of the armed forces, and capacity building to counter regional threats shared both by NATO and the regional partners. By now, NATO's Partnership Cooperation Menu includes over thirty areas of cooperation encompassing more than 1,400 activities (NATO 2024a).

After the turn of millennium, 'projecting stability' became a more frequent buzzword in allied terminology. In 2006, Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer referred to it as 'NATO's new approach to security' (NATO 2006), and the 2010 Strategic Concept also highlighted crisis management and cooperative security among the alliance's core tasks besides collective defense. However, this was then primarily driven by sustained stabilization efforts in Afghanistan. As framed in the Strategic Concept:

“Partnerships enhance Euro-Atlantic and wider international security and stability; can provide frameworks for political dialogue and regional cooperation in the field of security and defense; contribute to strengthening our common values; and are essential to the success of many of our operations and missions. They enable us to share expertise; support broader reform; promote transparency, accountability and integrity in the defense sector; train and assist our partners in developing their own capabilities; and prepare interested nations for membership in NATO. They are also important in addressing emerging, and continuing, trans-national challenges such as proliferation, terrorism, maritime-, cyber- and energy security. ...

“We remain committed to further developing political dialogue and practical cooperation with our partners. ... Peace and stability in the Mediterranean region are essential for Euro-Atlantic security. ... We intend to further develop the Mediterranean Dialogue (MD) by raising its political and practical dimensions, in order to build mutual confidence and to deal together with the common security challenges in this region.” (NATO 2010, Art. 24-25.)

Also amongst the identified goals was streamlining NATO's partnership tools, further 'reaching out' to relevant partners to build trust, increasing transparency and developing practical cooperation, flexible formats to discuss security challenges, and building on the improvements in NATO's training mechanisms by considering methods to enhance individual partner's ability to build capacity. (NATO 2010, Art. 26.) To materialize practical elements of cooperation, NATO also developed a military concept for projecting stability, of which a working document (MC 0655/3) was publicly disclosed (Koehler 2018, 41). In this Military Committee document 'projecting stability' was defined as:

“A range of military and non-military activities that influence and shape the strategic environment in order to make neighboring regions more stable and secure in support of both NATO's strategic interests and those of its neighbors.” (MC 0655/3, Para. 5b.)

Russia's first aggression against Ukraine in 2014 involving the illegal annexation of Crimea and the destabilization of the Donbas triggered a partial refocusing of strategic priorities towards collective defense from crisis management, which dominated NATO endeavors in the previous decade. Therefore, there were no direct references to projecting stability in the Wales Summit declaration, as developments in the East dominated threat perceptions (Ringsmose – Rynning: 2021).

Despite this, the 2016 Warsaw Summit brought about the prioritization of 'projecting stability' in strategic thought. To some extent we can argue that Warsaw Summit decisions should be understood as a continuation of the Wales Summit

declaration in terms of countering the return of great power competition, adopting the view that the Southern Neighborhood is a natural continuation of the Eastern Neighborhood, where Russia and other competing powers, like China can challenge allied interests. The earlier outlined structural deficiencies and human security needs themselves would have triggered the heightened attention of allies after instability and insecurity rapidly spread across North Africa and the Sahel after the Arab Spring. This is also a recognition of new regional challenges linked to disruptive global phenomena such as climate change and food insecurity (Soler i Lecha, 2022, 1). The 2015 migration crisis made such challenges tangible in many European countries. Thus, the Warsaw Summit can be considered as a strategic turning point for projecting stability, and the Communique adopted by heads of state and government referred to it extensively (NATO 2016):

“NATO must retain its ability to respond to crises beyond its borders and remain actively engaged in projecting stability and enhancing international security through working with partners and other international organizations.” (Par. 6)

“Against the background of an increasingly unstable, global security environment, and based on a broad and strengthened deterrence and defense posture, we seek to contribute more to the efforts of the international community in projecting stability and strengthening security outside our territory, thereby contributing to Alliance security overall.” (Par. 80)

“Our efforts to enhance the Alliance’s role in projecting stability will be guided by enduring principles, including a 360 degree approach, commitment to democracy, human rights and the rule of law, complementarity with international actors, in particular with the UN, EU, and the OSCE and focusing on NATO’s added value, local ownership and buy-in, partner involvement, inclusiveness, tailored cooperation, long-term commitment, prioritization and sustainability, and overall coherence.” (Par. 81)

“NATO will continue to enhance its role in projecting stability, including through enhancing regional understanding and situational awareness, further adapting to the challenges and threats from all directions, reinforcing its maritime dimension, and developing a more strategic, more coherent, and more effective approach to partnerships. These efforts will draw upon the important contributions that partners can bring. The Alliance, including with partners where appropriate, will continue to help manage challenges – before, during, and after conflict – where they affect Alliance security. The implementation of the agreed Alliance policies and initiatives must also continue. At the same time, we will continue to consider the political implications of our effort.” (Par. 84.)

As Tardy (2022, 5.) assessed these developments , “Projecting Stability operated a merger of crisis management and cooperative security, with a range of military and non-military activities aiming at shaping the strategic environment in order to make neighboring regions more stable and secure.” Along with the discussion outlined in the Summit Communiqué, a Framework for the South was also adopted ‘to give some political cohesion to NATO’s activities in the Southern periphery’ (Tardy 2022, 5.). The Secretary General’s 2017 Annual Report dedicated an entire chapter to projecting stability (NATO 2017b), and the NATO Strategic Direction South Hub at Joint Force Command Naples was inaugurated in September 2017 and declared its full operational capacity on July 2018 (Koehler 2018, 42). The Hub’s activities are based on two pillars: an ‘understanding pillar’ responsible for increasing awareness, early warning and in-depth understanding of the South, and an ‘engagement pillar’ developing partnerships with local government and non-government actors in and beyond the security realm.

The 2022 Strategic Concept – adopted after Russia’s further, large-scale invasion of Ukraine – also insists on the linkages between global and regional security and binds NATO member states’ security to the stability of the Southern Neighborhood as well (NATO 2022b):

“Conflict, fragility and instability in Africa and the Middle East directly affect our security and the security of our partners. NATO’s southern neighborhood, particularly the Middle East, North Africa and Sahel regions, faces interconnected security, demographic, economic and political challenges. These are aggravated by the impact of climate change, fragile institutions, health emergencies and food insecurity. This situation provides fertile ground for the proliferation of non-state armed groups, including terrorist organizations. It also enables destabilizing and coercive interference by strategic competitors.” (Par. 11.)

“Pervasive instability results in violence against civilians, including conflict-related sexual violence, as well as attacks against cultural property and environmental damage. It contributes to forced displacement, fueling human trafficking and irregular migration. These trends pose serious transnational and humanitarian challenges. They undermine human and state security and have a disproportionate impact on women, children and minority groups.” (Par. 12.)

It is important to note that shared opportunities with the South had not been identified in the document, only concerns. Due to the wide variety of challenges and threats identified, the Secretary General tasked a senior expert group with conducting a year-long reflection process at the Vilnius Summit, whose report was published in May 2024, offering both a complex, in-depth analysis of the situation on the ground,

and a total of 114 recommendations for NATO to improve how partnerships in the Southern Neighborhood are successfully managed (NATO 2024c).

As a next step of the process, allies adopted an action plan for a stronger, more strategic and result-oriented approach towards the Southern Neighborhood to reinforce engagement with partners at the 2024 Washington Summit. To add another practical asset to intensify relations, the new position of ‘Special Representative for the Southern Neighborhood’ was established after the summit (NATO 2024b).

In sum, after three decades of enhancing partnerships with the Southern Neighborhood, NATO has a solid strategic assessment, an established partnership framework and a wide variety of tools to engage with North African and Sahel countries. In the following, the case study of Mauritania will offer lessons learnt and identify working practices from a demand-driven relationship.

4. NATO’s tailored partnership in the Sahel: Mauritania

Out of the ten Sahel countries examined in this book, NATO has established a tailored and structured partnership with Mauritania only, within the Mediterranean Dialogue since 1995, and NATO’s Defense and Related Security Capacity Building Initiative (DCB) since 2022.

Currently, Mauritania is one of the Mediterranean Dialogue countries that has an Individual Cooperation Program with NATO. Mediterranean Dialogue partners are offered participation in the programs available in NATO’s Partnership Cooperation Menu, from which Mauritania has been involved in the Science for Peace and Security Program (SPS) and the Defense Education Enhancement Program (DEEP). Mauritania has been participating in NATO SPS since 2007, and in this framework an outstanding result of the cooperation was creating a national crisis management center and four operational coordination centers in the country (in Nouakchott, Nouadhibou, Rosso and Nema). The regional centers track incidents and gather information about crises in their respective areas of responsibility, while SPS finances the operation of the national center. (Ghasem 2018) Mauritania joined NATO DEEP in 2013, which provides tailored practical support in developing and reforming local professional military education institutions. In this framework, members of the Mauritanian security and defense forces receive training and can participate in NATO’s dedicated staff courses on crisis management, arms trafficking and border management, for example. The country is also a beneficiary of the NATO Trust Fund on stockpile destruction and ammunition storage, making sure that small and light arms do not reach extremist violent organizations and terrorist groups (Ghasem 2018).

Even though DCB was founded at the 2014 Wales Summit, it offers partnership tools upon request, and Mauritania has been the only Sahel country to request such assistance. As a request-driven process,

“DCB activities seek to enable the creation of viable, effective and resilient defense institutions in NATO partners. They are tailored to the specific needs of partners; activities can range from strategic-level advice to practical assistance on defense capability and local forces development, as well as specific projects in support of these objectives. At the strategic level, it delivers advice on security sector reform and institution-building, including national security architecture, policy and defense planning development, and related procedures. At the operational level, the initiative delivers training and education focused on defense capability and local forces development” (NATO 2024d).

The DCB package for Mauritania focuses on six key areas: Special Operations Forces, intelligence, maritime security, stockpile management of small arms and light weapons, military career transition program, and military education. In addition to strengthening Mauritania’s defense and security capacities, the DCB package for Mauritania also offers a platform for NATO to contribute to broader efforts to maintain regional stability in the Sahel. (NATO 2024e)

In summary, while NATO’s engagement with Mauritania has remained limited, currently this is the most advanced example of a Sahel country’s use of the partnership and projecting stability toolbox. One might characterize this relation as still going through the ‘trust-building’ phase. However, it is driven by the demands of the partner country, it benefits both Mauritania (in crisis management) and regional neighbors (preventing arms trafficking), as well as NATO (collaboration against terrorism). Partnership programs are conducted at the tactical level and are able to generate positive perceptions about NATO’s involvement in building stability. A possible shortcoming is their low visibility, what limits the positive impact at the societal level. Still, relevant questions remain as to how such low-level cooperation could be enhanced, keeping in mind the many limitations on the Alliance’s engagement in the wider Sahel region, as briefly summarized in the next subchapter.

5. Limitations to NATO’s role in the Sahel

As we have seen, projecting stability works as a demand-driven approach to extending cooperative security through strengthening partnerships. However, there are inherent limitations to this agenda, both within the alliance, and among partners. When we design our policies towards the Southern Neighborhood for the decades to come, we must keep these limitations in mind.

First, partnerships in the South do not have such transformative prospects as the partnerships that had been developed towards the East in the 1990s (with Central Europe in a strategic vacuum after the collapse of the Warsaw Pact, the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the democratic changes of regime across the region). Neither

NATO, nor North African and Sahel partner countries have such transformation and the prospect of NATO membership on their agendas. Moreover, NATO's enlargement to Central Europe and later in the Balkans was also accompanied by European Union enlargement, gradually bringing about political, economic and military transformations that could decisively stabilize the region. This basic feature limits the incentives of Southern partners to structurally deepen their relations with NATO, open up their security sectors, and adapt their policies to NATO's expectations.

Second, despite more balanced threat perceptions and strategic evaluation of the mid-2010s and NATO's official stance of a 360 degrees approach, member states are obviously divided on whether threats and challenges from the East, or the South (maybe the Arctic) are to be prioritized (Calmels, 2020). This is a problem not only as it leads to the fragmentation of efforts and resources, but also because major challenges from the two directions require different answers. From the East, a nuclear-armed, conventional great power, Russia threatens the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Nordic, Central and Eastern European countries, accompanied by a wide array of hybrid actions, to be countered by strengthening deterrence, territorial defense, joint reaction and resilience capacities. From the South transnational, mostly non-military challenges emanate, against which crisis management capabilities and cooperation with local partners through building stabilization capacities are required. Moreover, Southern member states themselves are often divided over particular issues like energy security, or the relation to Libya, Egypt, and others in the wider region (Soler i Lecha, 2022, 4–5). Such divisions risk the internal integrity of the alliance.

Third, NATO's reputation in the South is rather unfavorable, which stems from the colonial past of some member states (who are also active in North Africa and the Sahel), and the destabilizing effects of NATO's Libya intervention (Dizolele, 2024). This negative image is abused by strategic competitors, such as Russia, as well (D'Amato & Baldaro, 2024), presenting themselves as anti-imperial forces, the supporters of local stability, and the defenders of national sovereignty.

Fourth, building on the waning influence of European powers and the United States in the region, geopolitical has competition brought new external actors on board. Russia and China, as well as regional powers such as United Arab Emirates strive to extend their political, economic or military power, often abusing the fragility of governance of the countries in North Africa and the Sahel.

Fifth, as Larsen and Koehler (2020, 17.) emphasized, there is an inherent tension between NATO's emphasis on a demand-driven approach in developing partnerships and the strategic interests in capitalizing on capable, credible, legitimate and well-functioning (security) institutions.

Last, but not least, greater European commitment to the South presupposes peace in the transatlantic region, including on the European continent, both on the East Flank and in the Western Balkans, which does not seem to be a given anymore.

Conclusions and recommendations

The Sahel suffers from a multitude of security issues from intrastate conflicts, terrorism and organized crime to state fragility, bad governance, or porous borders, as well as human security shortcomings. Strategic foresight and scenario analysis shows that this situation is not likely to improve, while proliferating state fragmentation, strengthening extremisms and terrorism, and external actors' growing influence are expected to challenge NATO's security interests. The alliance, however, can play a role in managing only some of these challenges and threats through the strengthening of security and military institutions with partners that are willing and able to cooperate, but definitely not through direct military intervention.

Effective security provision in the MENA is hampered by two different problems: capacity shortfall (what is lack of capacity preventing effective security provisions despite best efforts) and a lack of strategic leadership (meaning deficiencies in security sector governance, preventing capacities from being deployed efficiently) (Larson & Koehler, 2020, 18). Therefore, within a regional strategic framework (the Mediterranean Dialogue) and tailored national programs for cooperation, NATO has been engaged in capacity-building, security sector reform, counterterrorism, and military training activities. After gaining momentum gradually, 'projecting stability' has been the overarching strategic approach of NATO, particularly since the 2016 Warsaw Summit, also adopting a Framework for the South and then updating institutional approaches and cooperative schemes at the 2022 Madrid Summit (Bin, 2018). Despite these developments, Mauritania has remained the only country among the Sahel countries engaged in structured relations so far.

NATO's role in the Sahel is clearly sub-strategic, and this is unlikely to change, or possibly to further diminish, having in mind the divisions among NATO member states, the proliferating transnational challenges that lack adequate regional answers, the geopolitical competition with Russia, China and others, and both European member states' and the United States' reshuffle of their strategic priorities to other regions. A recent evaluation from NATO's Southern Hub even concluded that 'the gap between Western nations and Sahel countries in terms of cooperation has widened due to rapidly changing security dynamics, divergent priorities, and inconsistent approaches' (NSD-S Hub & UFV, 2024, 14).

Therefore, the reconsideration of established goals, ways and means is necessary. The group of senior experts appointed by the NATO Secretary General published their report with this goal in 2024 and offered altogether 114

recommendations for improving relations in the Southern Neighborhood both in terms of actors and cooperation themes. Unfortunately, recommendations focusing on the Sahel remained way too general and shallow (NATO 2024c, 16–17). The following recommendations offer strategic alternatives:

1. Revise NATO's partnership framework with North Africa and the Sahel, moving away from the geographical feature to a functional approach to partnerships that is moving from the regional grouping format of the Mediterranean Dialogue to a series of separate bilateral or multilateral engagements with states and regional organizations on specific topics.

2. Strengthen coordination and the division of tasks with other regional organizations: coordination and cooperation in security and defense, and the division of tasks with political and economic institutions that are better suited to provide for human security and development than NATO.

3. Increase NATO's awareness of local and (sub)regional developments through cultivating structured and sustained relations with the widest possible range of regional actors: governments, security institutions, think tanks and experts, as well as regional cooperation forums, such as the African Union and the G5 Sahel.

4. Improve stabilization and crisis management approaches and instruments, because the experience from the Iraq and Afghanistan operations showed that there was a disconnection between allies' security priorities and local populations' expectations, resulting in distrust and frustration, undermining the sense of ownership among local actors (Soler i Lecha, 2022, 5). Moreover, NATO should avoid both the stated policy goal and even the image of trying to intervene in the political systems of partners.

5. Craft a new narrative inclusive of southern partners, institutional improvements to strengthen engagement, enhance and expand capacity building, improve communication, and expand outreach beyond governments. Push back against the anti-Western messaging, disinformation, fake news, and anti-institutional sentiment that have damaged NATO's image.

6. Articulate a clearer strategic approach that will not only carry forward its current priorities of stability and counterterrorism but also provide a clearer value proposition for its southern neighbors. (Colombo & Fakir, 2024)

7. Focus NATO's cooperative security policy for the South on ways and means to transform partners into security providers, rather than security consumers (Soler i Lecha, 2022, 5).

8. Generate the resources needed to increase outreach and fill both existing and new partnerships with practical elements of cooperation.

9. Focus on the impact evaluation of the demand-driven, tailor-made annual working programs of partners and carry on with positive activities only, while abandoning non-functioning relations.

10. Harmonize the diverging policies of Southern NATO member states (at least) as opposing influences, since such interventions weaken any agenda locally and regionally.

Even though these recommendations at the strategic level are somewhat abstract and do not address all needs and opportunities at the local, tactical level, first it is strategic partners NATO needs to engage with if the intention of shaping the Southern Neighborhood in our interest is serious.

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PART II: GLOBAL AND NATIONAL RELATIONSHIPS WITH THE REGION

CHAPTER 6

The African Union and The Sahel

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Abstract

Africa continues to grapple with persistent conflicts, highlighting the ongoing struggle to achieve peace and security across the continent. Nowhere is this challenge more evident than in the Sahel region, where instability has fostered a breeding ground for terrorism, insurgencies, and various other security threats. Tasked with promoting peace, security, and stability, the African Union (AU) created the African Peace and Security Architecture as a testament to its commitment to managing security dynamics within Africa. The AU's involvement in countries across the Sahel, such as Mali, Burkina Faso, and Nigeria, underscores its dedication to ensuring the security of Sahelian populations. While these interventions have yielded some degree of effectiveness, the AU has encountered institutional and capacity-related hurdles in fulfilling its role as a security guarantor. Consequently, there have been instances where the AU has relied on external actors to address conflicts and violent extremism in the Sahel. This chapter delves into the AU's involvement in the Sahel and reflects on its strategy for the region and highlights how it has cooperated with regional organisations in tackling major security challenges. It sheds light on the achievements and shortcomings of the AU's efforts in the Sahel, offering recommendations aimed at enhancing the organisation's ability to leverage its mandate in mitigating and containing entrenched insecurity within the region. Central to these recommendations is the call for African leaders in the Sahel to demonstrate the necessary political will to eradicate insecurity, with the AU serving as a platform for fostering such collective action.

Keywords: AU, Sahel, regional organisations, conflict, security, cooperation

Introduction

The African continent continues to be plagued by relentless conflicts following the post-colonial and Cold War eras. One of the enduring impacts of European colonialism was the establishment of states with artificial boundaries, which were inherently weak and unable to effectively govern their territories due to the diverse ethnic, religious, and tribal makeup of their societies (Ogun & Aslan, 2013). In Africa, this legacy has resulted in weakened states, shaped by the incomplete state-building efforts of the colonial era, which have left a foundation of fundamentally flawed state structures. Furthermore, the violence that characterised colonial rule, persisted after independence, causing these states to be further weakened. Lastly, partial state-building of the colonial period meant that only portions of the territory under colonial rule were administered, leaving large areas ungoverned. This lack of governance undermined the legitimacy of the colonial states. (Heilbrunn, 2006)

The post-independence state in Africa has continued, in some ways, to behave similarly to the colonial administration, which has contributed to internal conflicts. Weakened states tend to be vulnerable to non-state actors such as armed groups because of their fragility and this has been a contributing factor in protracted conflict in certain African countries. These conflicts have led to a myriad of humanitarian crises that continue to compound the fragility of states and human security in Africa (Eze & Frimpong, 2021). This challenge is particularly evident in the Sahel region, where instability has created an environment conducive to terrorism, insurgencies, and a range of other security threats.

The Sahel region is a strip of land that lies to the immediate south of the Sahara and stretches from the east to the west across the breadth of Africa. The Sahel is a cultural and historical shoreline between the Middle East and sub-Saharan Africa making it a melting pot of Arabic, Islamic and nomadic cultures from the north, and indigenous and traditional cultures from the south (Suleiman, 2017). The Sahel is an important region because it possesses notable potential for renewable energy and sits atop of some of Africa's largest aquifers. It is potentially one of the richest regions in the world, abundant in human, cultural and natural resources (United Nations Africa Renewal, 2024). Together all these factors could potentially contribute to supporting economies and encourage sustainable development, while addressing drivers of instability.

The Sahel however is also a land of many challenges, with countries in the region such as Niger, Mali, Burkina Faso and Nigeria all facing increased terror attacks and violent extremism (Apau & Ziblim, 2019). The AU is the continental body responsible for ensuring "a peaceful and secure Africa." This is accomplished through mechanisms that foster a dialogue-centred approach to conflict prevention and resolution. The principal AU organ for promoting peace and security is the Peace and

Security Council (PSC) and is the fundamental pillar of the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA)—the framework through which peace, security and stability in Africa is promoted. (African Union, 2024) Through the APSA, the AU has engaged in post-conflict countries to support the establishment of sustainable peace and development (Khadiagala, 2021). However, in the Sahel region the AU has had a mixed record when it comes to addressing the ongoing security challenges.

While the security dynamics of the Sahel involves an interaction between numerous actors—international, regional and local, the chapter primarily focuses on the role of the AU. The chapter aims to unpack the AU's involvement in and strategy for the Sahel, focusing on its responses to insurgencies and terrorism as this is the primary driver of insecurity in the region, and reflecting on the extent of cooperation between the AU and regional blocs. The second part of the chapter looks at the successes and shortcomings of the AU's efforts in the Sahel. Lastly, the chapter offers some recommendations on how the AU can further enhance its ability to mitigate and contain insecurity in the Sahel.

The Roots of Insecurity in the Sahel

Armed conflict, rapid population growth, extreme poverty, food insecurity, climate change, and epidemics dominate the Sahel region, endangering the lives of communities already on the brink of disaster. The Sahel region has experienced severe impacts from climate change, with three major droughts over recent decades pushing its populations to the brink of humanitarian catastrophe (Ochimi, 2023). The security challenges in the Sahel are driven by several factors including weak governance, unguarded borders, widespread poverty and inter-communal conflicts. These weaknesses are exploited by extremist groups to set up bases, recruit members and carry out attacks throughout the region (Amani Africa, 2023).

Some of the world's poorest and weakest countries in the world are found in the Sahel such as Burkina Faso, Mali, Mauritania and Niger, and their fragility is linked (to a certain extent) to on-going violence, humanitarian crises, displacement and migration (Bøås, 2019). The escalating instability and worsening security conditions in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger have raised concerns among neighbouring West African nations about the potential for regional spillover effects. The Sahel is now home to some of the world's most dangerous terrorist groups such as Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam (JNIM), Boko Haram and DAESH West Africa Province (ISWAP) and DAESH in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) (Ochimi, 2023). The Liptako-Gourma region (which lies in the central Sahel, straddling the border areas of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger) and the Lake Chad Basin sub-regions are the primary hubs of violence and humanitarian crises in the Sahel. This is clearly indicated by the fact that attacks by various terrorist groups are constantly hitting critical infrastructure elements that are important to the residents here, such as healthcare. In the absence of this, the safety of the people

living here has been reduced to a minimum (Besenyő, Barten, De Cauwer, Tin & Gulyás, 2023). The region's current instability is linked to the 2011 collapse of the Libyan state, which triggered a surge of weapons and armed fighters into the area, setting off the Tuareg rebellion in Mali in 2012.²⁵ The Mali conflict spilled over into Burkina Faso in 2015 at first through terrorist attacks led by Boko Haram, intensifying in 2016 following the formation of a new group called Ansar ul-I religiously extremist insurgents in Niger carried out attacks in the western region of the country as well as in the south-eastern region. The conflict in Niger escalated in 2017 and attacks occurred frequently during 2021 (Raga, Lemma, & Keane, 2023).

In the Lake Chad Basin violent extremism has persisted due to Boko Haram in Northern Nigeria which was forced underground in 2009 but resurfaced again in 2011 (Center for Preventative Action, 2024). In 2014 Boko Haram kidnapped 276 girls from a school in Chibok, Borno state casting the group into the international spotlight, igniting the worldwide Bring Back Our Girls movement in April 2014. In Mali and the broader Sahel different radical groups vie for power. Terrorist groups such as the Movement for Unity and J in West Africa (MUJAO) and Ansarul-I Group, both linked to the Al-Qaeda, operate in the region. As a result, the region experiences substantial military activity, including operations by the self-proclaimed DAESH and other non-state armed groups that are actively engaged in the desert regions (Saka, 2024). Burkina Faso has also been on the receiving end of terrorist attacks with the first terrorist attack happening in 2014 following the kidnapping of a Romanian security officer in the north of the country close to the border with Mali and Niger. On August 23, 2015, in the same region, a gendarmerie brigade was attacked, resulting in the death of one fighter. On October 9, in Samorogouan, western Burkina Faso, near the Malian border, three gendarmes were killed when terrorists stormed their barracks in retaliation for the arrest of one of their members (Issaev, Korotayev & Bobarykina, 2022).

Efforts have been made by various actors to fight these groups. Proactive military campaigns have been conducted in the region by international organisations such as NATO and ECOWAS to curb the atrocities in the area (Saka, 2024). Despite these counter measures, the expansion of violent extremism in the Sahel continues and is attributed to persistent weak governance because of corruption, democratic backsliding, legitimacy deficits and the violation of human rights (Center for Preventative Action, 2024).

²⁵ From 1960-2012 there have been four Tuareg rebellions. Historical tensions between the north and south have always been the underlying driver of the recurring rebellions but other factors have also fuelled resentment and perpetuated the conflict. See https://www.clingendael.org/pub/2015/the_roots_of_malis_conflict/2_rebellion_and_fragmentation_in_northern_mali/

The Role of the AU in Peace and Security in Africa

The following section will look at the AU's counter-terrorism framework and the APSA as the mechanisms through which the AU has endeavoured to deliver on its mandate as the security guarantor on the continent. While there is an array of security challenges in the Sahel region, terrorism has been one of the most pressing threats to peace and security in Africa, prompting the AU to formulate a plan of action to address it.

AU Counter-Terrorism Framework

1. 1999 OAU Convention on the Prevention and Combating of Terrorism: This was adopted by the 35th Ordinary Session of the OAU Summit, held in Algiers, Algeria. The Convention requires that States Parties, under their national legislation, criminalise terrorist acts as defined in the Convention. The convention defines areas of cooperation among states, establishes state jurisdiction over terrorist acts providing a legal framework for extradition as well as extra-territorial investigations and mutual legal assistance.

2. 2002 AU Plan of Action on the Prevention and Combating of Terrorism in Africa: The Plan of Action implements practical counterterrorism measures designed to significantly address Africa's security challenges. It encompasses actions in key areas such as policing and border management, legislative and judicial measures, financing of terrorism, and enhancing information sharing mechanisms. Forming part of the implementation of the 2002 Plan of Action, the African Centre for the Study and Research on Terrorism (ACSRT) functions as a structure for centralising information, studies, and analysis related to terrorism and terrorist organisations and to design counterterrorism (CT) capacity-building programs. The ACSRT plays a pivotal role in steering the AU's CT efforts and in collaborating with several regional and international partners to ensure coherent and coordinated CT efforts in the continent. (AU Plan of Action, 2002)

3. The Dakar Declaration Against Terrorism: This declaration was adopted in 2001 with AU member states recognising the destructive effects of terrorism and the challenge it poses to development and stability on the continent. The declaration emphasised the need for joint cooperation among member states in coordinating and harmonising continental efforts to combat terrorism. (AU Plan of Action, 2002)

4. African Anti-terrorism Model Law: This seeks to harmonise domestic counterterrorism laws. The model law also endorsed the AU Assembly decision to form the African Mechanism for Police Cooperation (AFRIPOL) to enhance inter-state police cooperation, particularly in addressing transnational crime. (UNOAU, 2024)

There was a need for an integrated continental approach (as indicated by the framework) because of the very nature of modern terrorism, which tends to cross

borders - evidenced by Boko Haram (active in parts of Cameroon and Nigeria) or al-Qaeda in the I Maghreb which established bases in Northern Mali during the 2012 Mali crisis. As such terrorist groups thrive when there is no coordination among states. Therefore, the AU had a pivotal role to play in providing a unified counterterrorism strategy and ensuring that state responses are coordinated. This in turn would enable it to address the transnational nature of terrorism and curb any future emergence of safe havens (Allison, 2015).

African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA)

The APSA is the framework through which the AU responds to peace and security challenges. The APSA is premised on the following pillars: (The Peace & Security Council, 2024)

1. The Panel of the Wise: supports the PSC and the Chairperson of the AU Commission (AUC) in the promotion and maintenance of peace, security and stability in Africa, particularly in the areas of preventive diplomacy and mediation.
2. Continental Early Warning System (CEWS): the main objective of the CEWS is to anticipate and prevent conflicts on the continent, and to provide timely information about evolving violent conflicts, based on specifically developed indicators.
3. African Standby Force (ASF): The PSC Protocol relating to the Establishment of the Peace and Security Council, provides for an African Standby Force to be established to enable the PSC to perform its responsibilities with respect to the deployment of peace support missions and intervention.
4. Peace Fund: The role of the Peace Fund is to provide “the necessary financial resources for peace support missions and other operational activities related to peace and security.”

Application of APSA: The AU Strategy for the Sahel

The AU maintains diplomatic relations with countries of the Sahel which underpin the AU’s framework for the Sahel. The AU works closely with the Sahel countries to promote stability, economic growth, regional integration and sustainable development. Furthermore, the AU’s diplomatic engagements in the region can be observed in its interactions with ECOWAS and interventions in the Sahel.

The AU’s initial involvement in the Sahel dates back several years, promoted by the Libyan crisis in 2011 and the effect it had on the region. The AUC and the United Nations (UN) Secretariat embarked on a joint multidisciplinary mission in the Sahel region from 7 to 23 December 2011, with the aim of assessing the impact of the Libyan crisis on the region (The AU Strategy for the Sahel Region, 2014).

In 2014 the AU formulated a plan for the Sahel, the *Strategy of the African Union for the Sahel Region*, founded on three core pillars: governance, security, and development. The African Union Mission for Mali and the Sahel (MISAHEL) serves as the AU's foremost mechanism for ensuring the effective implementation of its strategy for the Sahel region (The AU Strategy for the Sahel Region, 2014). Unpacking the core pillars of the strategy the following components can be identified:

1. *Regional Collaboration*: MISAHEL aimed to collaborate and coordinate with other structures in the AU, within the region and outside of it, to respond to crises. Furthermore, for the strategy to be effectively implemented, assistance and collaboration with the Regional Economic Communities (RECs) would be required, specifically the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS), the Community of Sahel-Saharan States (CEN-SAD), the African Development Bank (AfDB), the Interstate Committee for Drought Control in the Sahel (CILSS). (The AU Strategy for the Sahel Region, 2014)

2. *Strengthening governance in Sahel countries*: Through MISAHEL and in collaboration with the countries of the region, RECS and external stakeholder, the AU emphasises striving for good governance through the consolidation of the rule of law, the strengthening of democratic institutions, fighting corruption, strengthening electoral processes, promotion of human rights and humanitarian action, conflict management and supporting reconciliation and dialogue processes. (The AU Strategy for the Sahel Region, 2014)

3. *Security*: Together with countries of then Sahel the AU aims to foster regional cooperation in the space of security through the Nouakchott Process (created in 2013). The objective of this mechanism is to strengthen regional security collaboration and facilitate information sharing in the fight against terrorism, while advancing the implementation of the APSA in the Sahelo-Saharan region (Gnanguênon, n.d.). The AU would support programmes for Disarmament, Demobilisation and Socio-economic Reintegration (DDR) of armed groups of Northern Mali, participate in Security Sector Reform (SSR) programmes in the Sahel region and promote cooperation with partners in the field of security (The AU Strategy for the Sahel Region, 2014). The AU PSC also authorised the formation of a Joint Force by the G5 Sahel²⁶ in 2017 to fight terrorism and transnational organised crime.

4. *Development*: The AU promotes stability and development in the Sahel. The AU's framework supports post-conflict reconstruction and seeks to strengthen local capacities. Two examples of initiatives that were envisaged to help countries in the

²⁶ A regional organisation established in 2014 by Burkina Faso, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Chad to promote development and security within its member states. In 2022 Mali withdrew from the alliance and in late 2023 Burkina Faso and Niger followed. The remaining members plan to dissolve the alliance.

Sahel with their development projects were the 'Civic Service for Development Action' (SCAD) and the AU policy on 'Post-Conflict Reconstruction and Development (PCRD).' (The AU Strategy for the Sahel Region, 2014)

Before turning to the AU's interventions in the Sahel, the following sections will briefly reflect on the AU's response to coups and collaboration with NATO in confronting the challenges facing the region.

AU responses to coup d'états in the Sahel

The African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance was adopted in 2007 by AU member states with the aim of promoting democracy and human rights in Africa. Some of the provisions of the charter are to combat Unconstitutional Government Changes (UGC), and the charter serves as a legal instrument that categorises coups as falling under the umbrella of unconstitutional regime change. Article 25:1 of the charter reads:

When the Peace and Security Council observes that there has been an unconstitutional change of government in a State Party, and that diplomatic initiatives have failed, it shall suspend the said State Party from the exercise of its right to participate in the activities of the Union in accordance with the provisions of articles 30 of the Constitutive Act and 7 (g) of the Protocol. The suspension shall take effect immediately (African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance, 2007).

Despite the above article 25:2 of the charter notes that:

However, the suspended State Party shall continue to fulfil its obligations to the Union, in particular with regard to those relating to respect of human rights (African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance, 2007).

This indicates that even when a member state is suspended from AU activities, it remains responsible for upholding and protecting human rights. Furthermore, article 25:4 states that:

The perpetrators of unconstitutional change of government shall not be allowed to participate in elections held to restore the democratic order or hold any position of responsibility in political institutions of their State (African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance, 2007).

The AU has consistently enforced its sanctions regime in response to coup d'états. In nearly all cases of coups or military interventions, public condemnation has been swiftly followed by the automatic suspension of the affected state from AU activities. This general approach by the AU was illustrated with Mali when on August 18, 2020, Malian President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita, along with his prime minister and other government officials, was arrested and detained by the military in what appeared

to be a coup (Nyinevi & Fosu, 2023). When President Mamadou Tandja was overthrown in 2010 in Niger the AU suspended Niger's membership, likewise Burkina Faso was suspended in 2015 when interim president Michel Kafando was overthrown (Kato, 2024). However, the AU sang a different tune when it came to Chad in 2021 following the death of President Idriss Deby and military takeover where a de facto government was announced. The AU's PSC backed the junta, contradicting its own standard operating procedures on UGC's, perhaps because Chad is seen as a major security player in the Sahel, contributing significantly to the fight against extremist groups in the region (Kato, 2024).

AU-NATO Cooperation in African Peace Operations

AU-NATO cooperation has primarily been pragmatic, responding to specific requests from the African Union for support in targeted areas. As outlined in March 2020, the key areas of collaboration include operational support, training assistance, and structural aid (NATO, 2023). An example of such cooperation was in 2005 when NATO, at the request of the AU, provided logistical support for the AU mission in Sudan (AMIS) to ensure the protection of civilians (Akuffo, 2011). Following the request, the then Chairman of the AU Commission, Alpha Oumar Konare, visited NATO headquarters. This visit held both symbolic and strategic significance for the developing security cooperation between the AU and NATO. Symbolically it was the first time an AU official had visited the NATO headquarters, and from a strategic perspective the Chairmans visit marked a new policy opening that would shape the AU's relationship with NATO, reflecting Africa's leadership in tackling the continent's interconnected security and development challenges (Akuffo, 2011).

NATO's logistical support for AMIS, specifically through the coordination of strategic airlift, commenced in July 2005. Thereafter NATO transported approximately 2,800 AU troops, including 49 civilian police officers. These airlift missions represented a joint effort between NATO and the European Union, working together to foster peace in the Darfur region (NATO, 2008). Beyond the airlift missions, NATO also conducted Staff Capacity Building workshops for AU officers at the Deployed Integrated Task Force (DITF) Headquarters in Ethiopia. This training focused on strategic-level planning, equipping participants with technologies and techniques to enhance their analysis and understanding of Darfur. It also aimed to identify ways in which AU assets can be effectively deployed to shape the operational environment and prevent crises (NATO, 2008).

Although NATO's support to AMIS came to an end in December 2007 following the transformation of AMIS to the UN-AU Mission in Darfur (UNAMID), the AU and NATO sought to develop a long-term security cooperation which would focus on technical support for building ASF capacity (Akuffo, 2011). In 2015 the then AU Commissioner for Peace and Security Ambassador Smail Chergui visited NATO and

signed the technical agreement on NATO-AU cooperation, followed by NATO opening its liaison office at AU headquarters in Addis Ababa. Some other milestones in deepening AU-NATO cooperation came in 2016 when NATO leaders agreed to further strengthen and expand the Alliance's political and practical cooperation with the AU at the Warsaw Summit; in 2019 a cooperation agreement was signed to strengthen partnership and bring NATO and the AU closer together and in 2021 when the NATO-AU Cooperation Plan aimed at enhancing military cooperation was proposed to the AU (NATO, 2023).

AU and Regional Organisations: Interventions in the Sahel under the APSA

Regarding the political situation in Mali, The AU High Representative for Mali and the Sahel, and Head of MISAHEL, former President Pierre Buyoya, played a significant role in the negotiations leading to the signing of the 2013 Ouagadougou Agreement.²⁷ MISAHEL remains actively involved in overseeing its implementation, particularly through the Follow-up and Evaluation Committee and the Joint Technical Security Commission established as part of the Agreement. The AU has also rendered various forms of assistance including financial support and supporting the organisation of Mali's 2013 Presidential and Legislative elections (AU Mali Report, 2014).

Both ECOWAS and the AU are recognised as legitimate regional organisations who have the authority to address conflicts in West Africa; however, their intervention strategies often differ. In some cases, West African states facing security challenges have sought solutions through ECOWAS, significantly shaping the organisation's approach to conflict intervention (Suzuki, 2020). The AU, as a stakeholder in a broader regional context, pursues its security interests, which shape its intervention strategies. Depending on the specific conflict, both the AU and ECOWAS have access to various tools and mechanisms for intervention (Suzuki, 2020).

An example of this is Guinea which was one of the first countries where both ECOWAS and the AU jointly intervened. Following the death of President Lansana Conté in December 2008, the military, seized control of Guinea. In response, the AU PSC suspended Guinea's membership. Similarly, ECOWAS also suspended Guinea but opted to maintain an open and constructive dialogue with the National Council for Democracy and Development (CNDD), the ruling junta under Camara's leadership (Suzuki, 2020). In January 2009, the AU Commission took a proactive approach by organising a consultative meeting on the situation in Guinea. This meeting resulted in the formation of the International Contact Group on Guinea (ICG-G), co-chaired by the African Union and ECOWAS. Simultaneously, an ECOWAS Extraordinary Summit

²⁷ Full title of agreement: “*Preliminary Agreement to Presidential Elections and Inclusive Peace Talks in Mali*” aimed to bring an end to hostilities in Northern Mali and facilitate the holding of presidential and legislative elections (Buyoya, 2015).

issued a statement declaring that members of the CNDD, the transitional prime minister Kabiné Komara, and his government would be barred from participating in the elections planned for later that year. The creation of the ICG-G marked an early effort by the African Union (AU) and ECOWAS to institutionalise a collaborative partnership. While there were some tensions between ECOWAS and the AU regarding the mediation process, this initiative reinforced ECOWAS's leadership role, and the REC overall has a positive response to the ICG-G's diplomatic initiatives (Suzuki, 2020).

The role of the RECs in assisting the AU to protect human life and curb insecurity in the Sahel was evident during the 2012 Tuareg rebellion. In November 2012, leaders from both ECOWAS and the AU approved a plan to create a joint coordination mechanism and called on the UN Security Council to authorise an African-led international support mission to Mali. This mission, comprising 3,300 personnel including infantry units, air assets, and formed police units, was proposed for an initial duration of one year (Ochimi, 2023).

Another example of intervention under the APSA was the ECOWAS intervention to restore order during the constitutional crisis following the presidential elections in Gambia in 2016. ECOWAS initially used diplomatic efforts and high-level mediation, involving the presidents of Ghana, Guinea, Liberia, Mauritania, and Nigeria. When these efforts failed, ECOWAS authorised a military intervention. Approximately 7,000 troops from the ECOWAS Standby Force prepared to enter Gambia. This combination of diplomacy and the credible threat of military action led to a swift and effective resolution of the Gambian conflict, with no casualties reported. (European Court of Auditors Report, 2018).

Africa-led Peace Operations in the Sahel

Africa-led peace operations are said to be important tools in managing conflict. Over the past two decades these peace operations have undertaken innovative missions to confront unconventional threats. Not only have they been able to improve cooperation between regional security forces, they have sometimes also provided normative leadership in responding to grave horrors and unconstitutional take-overs of power (Allen, 2023). A notable peace operation in the Sahel that have had some impact is the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) which has been able to improve coordination with external donors, local leaders and regional entities (such as the Lake Chad Basin Commission) thereby facilitating humanitarian assistance, the return of refugees and stabilisation programs. Another measure of success has been rapid deployment of regional actors to the conflict area for e.g., the African-led International Support Mission in Mali (AFISMA). When it comes to missions that have helped African security forces improve coordination in fighting cross-border security challenges another example (beyond the MNJTF) is the G5 Sahel Joint Forces where regional militaries in addressing transnational insurgency, setting up joint headquarters,

facilitating the sharing of intelligence and tackling cross-border operations (Allen, 2023).

Challenges facing the AU in promoting security in Africa and the Sahel

While Africa-led peace operations have had some measure of success, they have not been without their challenges and these will be highlighted in the following section, among other limitations faced by the AU. Political cooperation among AU member states remains a major problem broadly. Political cooperation spans across various activities from peace accords, cease fires, economic linkages and expressions of support. The main challenges to this type of cooperation “is political instability within AU member states occasioned by bad governance and corruption and a lack of respect for the constitution and the rule of law, all of which are symptoms of leadership and institutional failure” (Williams, 2017). In Africa authoritarian regimes continue to thrive and while leaders of these regimes claim to uphold democracy, they often engage in unconstitutional changes of government, cling to power unnecessarily, and resort to violence against their own citizens to maintain control. These actions have contributed to prolonged violent conflicts across the continent, perpetuating ethnic, political, and religious divisions, which are frequently exploited for political advantage. The inadequate institutionalisation of democracy limits the ability to establish and enforce electoral rules effectively, hindering compliance by political actors. This shortfall places significant strain on democratisation efforts and contributes to the persistence of protracted conflicts across the continent. An example of this was the case of Gambia where former President Yahya Jammeh refused to hand over power to the new president, Adama Barrow. Another issue to note is states contradictory behaviour when it comes to counterterrorism. While AU member states agree that terrorism cannot be justified, often their behaviours run contrary to these statements, and have themselves sponsored terrorist activities in the continent. This becomes a hurdle when trying to get certain member states to cooperate with counterterrorism initiatives (Williams, 2017).

National sovereignty and subsidiarity also limit the AU's response to crisis, specifically the PSC. Responding to former South African president Thabo Mbeki, who had asked the AU to intervene in Côte d'Ivoire, chairperson of the AU Commission Moussa Faki highlighted the following limitations: the lack of consistent implementation of the AU's legal and policy provisions, and the limitations put on the AU by the principle of subsidiarity. This principle emphasises the central role of regional organisations in leading interventions within their member states, which has consequently limited the scope of the AU's involvement in countries such as Mali, Burkina Faso, Guinea, and Côte d'Ivoire (Woldemichael, 2021). When the AU finally intervened in Mali, for example, the response was neither timely nor prompt, eventually being outshone by the French-led security initiatives (Bamidele, 2017). The AU

(through the PSC) is mandated to curb to any potential conflicts and respond to crises. Although the PSC can put an issue on its agenda, it does not mean that this will translate into an AU intervention (Woldemichael, 2021).

The implementation of the Sahel strategy has been hindered by an unclear division of responsibilities among various stakeholders (local, national, and regional) and by insufficient allocation of financial and human resources to the entities responsible for carrying it out. As such the MISAHEL, established to implement this strategy, has struggled to fulfil its mandate (PSC Report, 2018). The counter-terrorism framework, while comprehensive and progressive, has yet to have meaningful impact in the fight against terrorism. This is due to the difficulties in implementing the framework, both at a state level and within the AU's own institutions. The clearest evidence of the slow progress is the delayed ratification of the Protocol. Although adopted in 2004, the AU's anti-terrorism protocol required ratification by 15 member states to take effect. It took a decade to reach this threshold, finally entering into force in February 2014. Likewise, only about one-third of AU member states have introduced specific counter-terrorism legislation as recommended by the AU. This is perhaps not surprising as individual states have a different relationships with terrorism, that is for some it is a more pressing issue than for others (Allison, 2015). The reluctance of AU member states to ratify certain protocols aimed at combating terrorism also highlights the lack of political cooperation across the continent. While the AU relies on treaties to advance its policy objectives, it lacks the authority to compel member states to ratify these treaties or adhere to their provisions (Williams, 2017).

While African-led peace operations have shown promise, regionally led peace operations possess limited operational and expeditionary capabilities. Major African-led peace operations have been heavily reliant on external donors, including the European Union, the United States, and the United Nations. These international actors collectively invest billions of dollars annually to fund multilateral peacekeeping efforts across the continent (Allen, 2023). While the support of external actors has some benefits, peace and stability achieved through multilateral arrangements often comes with challenges such as unwarranted foreign interference (Ochimi, 2023). Another challenge is related to military component of African-led peace operations, which have often prioritised the deployment of military forces while lacking integration with civilian ministries, development agencies, and community-based initiatives aimed at conflict prevention and resolution. Moreover, the lack of professionalism among some African peacekeepers have led to serious issues, including involvement in corruption, instances of sexual abuse, and extrajudicial killings of civilians, undermining the credibility of such missions. While some missions have had some impact, others such as the G5 Sahel Joint Force have mainly concentrated on countering violent extremism, with limited integration into stabilisation initiatives led by the Sahel Alliance,

the United Nations, bilateral partners, and numerous NGOs. This lack of coordination and alignment remains a significant weakness in the collective efforts of regional actors to stabilise the Sahel region effectively (Allen, 2023).

Furthermore, there remains a challenge (for the AU) in engaging the continents RECs primarily due to overlapping memberships and functions. This often obscures the objectives of integration and fosters counterproductive competition among member states and institutions. (Economic Commission for Africa, 2004). While the efforts of sub-regional organisations are vital for fostering regional cooperation and integration, the programs, goals, and objectives of RECs must align with the broader regional interest to achieve maximum efficiency and impact. Only by doing so can the AU address the challenges posed by overlapping memberships and effectively coordinate and implement its protocols i.e., the counterterrorism framework (Williams, 2017).

While the abovementioned challenges are not exhaustive, these are some of the overarching challenges hindering the AU in making progress in ensuring peace and security on the continent and more specifically the Sahel region.

Recommendations

In order for the AU to strengthen its role more broadly it will need to enhance its institutional capacity and this also includes becoming more financially independent. This will require member states to come to the table and increase their financial contributions to support the cost of peace and security initiatives. Although over reliance on external actors to address security challenges in Africa is not ideal, the AU should continue to work with organisations like NATO on key issues such as counterterrorism. NATO can play a vital role in providing the AU with intelligence and surveillance support for threat detection and advisory support on counterinsurgency measures. Importantly, NATO should continue its collaboration with the AU in its peace missions and efforts to stabilise the Sahel. Enhanced collaboration with REC's, particularly with ECOWAS in the Sahel, is also vital to ensure that interventions are streamlined. When it comes to better implementation of the Sahel strategy and the counterterrorism framework the AU needs to address the disconnect between what states say about terrorism and their actions (or lack thereof) in combating terrorism.

The AU needs stronger accountability measures to ensure that leaders in the Sahel are fully committed to counterterrorism interventions. The AU should put greater effort in addressing the good governance and democracy deficit on the continent. The AU has frameworks to address institutional challenges such as the PCRD policy, which serves as a guide for the development of comprehensive policies and strategies that elaborate measures that seek to consolidate peace, promote sustainable development and pave the way for growth and regeneration in countries and regions emerging from conflict (PCRD Policy, 2006) and the African Governance Architecture (AGA), that

aims to promote good governance and enhance democracy in Africa (African Union, 2024). Better enforcement of these normative frameworks will be imperative in curbing the myriad of security issues that arise from fragile states.

At the core of these recommendations is the call for African leaders, specifically in the Sahel, to exercise the necessary political will to eradicate insecurity in the region. Without this political will and real commitment to address the challenges facing the region, the AU's vision of a peaceful Africa will remain largely unrealised.

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PART II: GLOBAL AND NATIONAL RELATIONSHIPS WITH THE REGION

CHAPTER 7

United States and The Sahel

Abstract

Inside the US administration, the Sahel has been the focus of attention since the early 2000s, primarily because of security concerns, influenced by policies stemming from the war on terrorism. It can be argued that in recent decades the Sahel region has not been at the top of the preference ranking of US policymakers, as the Middle East and Southeast Asia remain dominant in the Global South away from the US mainland.

However, the Sahel region is full of opportunities, and has become an increasingly active arena for competition among global powers for direct and indirect influence over the region's counter-terrorism efforts, government institutions and technological infrastructure, as well as for access to natural resources, markets and policymakers. In this competition, the United States is losing ground to its rivals, which will be a no longer ignorable foreign policy challenge for the incoming Trump administration in 2025.

The chapter will focus on the US military presence and its effectiveness, but will also explore its aid and economic policies, in accordance with geostrategic interests and the US desire to increase its diplomatic, economic and military influence in Africa. For this study, official government documents, reports and academic papers were used.

Keywords: *Sahel, USA, TSCTP, AGOA, USADF, Prosper Africa, Bureau of African Affairs, Donald Trump*

Introduction

The relationship between the US and the Sahel is diverse and multilayered, yet in most cases the Sahel has not been a particular focus of US foreign policy, and therefore when discussing the evolution of US-African relations, the Sahel is also included. Historically, the US has had influence in the region since decolonisation, and has itself supported the independence of African states and the end of colonial empires, as it was itself a colony. The main overlap between Africa and the Sahel from a US perspective is primarily diplomatic, while differences and characteristics can be

identified economically and militarily, but it was a challenge in the writing of this chapter to separate the Sahel from Africa policy as much as possible. The chapter will be divided into five major parts, the first of which will focus on the presidential terms that have been decisive for US-Africa relations, highlighting the key initiatives, events, cooperations or agreements that are still in practice or crucial today. Section Two focuses on US-African diplomatic relations through presidential visits, special envoys and summits. The next section, the economic, is focused on programmes and cooperation that have an impact on the current US interests in the region. Finally, security and military developments are described, with US military bases and support. The chapter concludes with an assessment of the likely scenario for Trump's second term Sahel policy.

History of US-African relations

During the Cold War, US-Africa and, by extension, US-Sahel relations began with the Bureau of African Affairs, founded in 1958. The aim was to enable the Department of State to devote its full attention to the African continent. The main emphasis of the initial Africa policy was to treat the newly independent states as equal partners and to accept their neutrality in the Cold War. To open up diplomatic channels, the US established embassies, so more and more US experts went to the regions to explore the states and their general political, social, cultural and economic characteristics (Wallechinsky, 2016). The result is that all the countries in the Sahel region have an American embassy, according to the list of official websites of U.S. Embassies (U.S. Embassy, 2024).

Within a few years, it became clear that the newly emerging African states lacked the classic system of checks and balances and authoritarian regimes had emerged, which led the US leadership of the time to change its aid policy towards the states from the 1970s onwards, shifting the focus from resources channelled through governments to direct delivery to rural populations (Wallechinsky, 2016). The 1973 oil crisis shocked the whole world with a drastic oil price increase, which showed the vulnerability of Africa and the Sahel countries in particular. The initial effects of climate change, rising oil prices, inflation, fertiliser shortages and export demand for raw materials caused a global food crisis in the region, which the USA could not ignore (Behmiri and Manso, 2013: 74-75). In the early 1990s, the Bush administration's policy towards Africa was to settle conflicts diplomatically (Wallechinsky, 2016). However, the 1993 Somalia incident, when Task Force Ranger soldiers were killed in action in Mogadishu (Dotson, 2016: 181-187), kept the US military out of Africa for years, and it was only after several years that US soldiers reappeared on the continent.

The decisions of the Clinton administration have been economically dominant to the present day, including in the Sahel. In 2000, the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) was implemented, granting eligible African countries duty-free access to

US markets for more than 1,800 products. This was dependent on meeting US liberal and democratic criteria. At the same time, these states were required to remove barriers to US investment, which made the private sector increasingly dominant in the region. In 2015, Congress passed a law to modernise and extend the programme until 2025, which is still in place at the time of writing (African Growth and Opportunity Act, 2024). Sudan represented the critical point, as al Turabi, who wanted to establish a DAESH for the whole world to follow in the regime of Omar al-Bashir, which led the Clinton administration to add Sudan to its list of states supporting terrorism in August 1993, and consequently to apply economic and political action against it, further isolating it (Shay and Liberman, 2007: 38-39). In 1995, the US withdrew completely from Sudan, although it had been providing humanitarian aid regularly until then. But at the same time, bin Laden and al-Qaeda were gaining influence inside Sudan. Increasingly worrying reports about al-Qaeda prompted the Clinton administration to take serious action against Sudan (Patey, 2007: 1003-1007). Secretary of State Madeleine Albright announced new sanctions against Sudan for its continued support of international terror and efforts to destabilise neighbouring countries. Sudanese government assets in the US were frozen and all trade with the African state has been banned. This was also a serious blow, as the US had provided humanitarian aid worth \$650 million to victims of the civil war from 1988 onwards (U.S. Department of State, 2009).

The presidency of George W. Bush was overshadowed by September 11, 2001. In addition to the devastating material damage and loss of innocent lives, the tragic attack on the World Trade Center changed world politics and strategic thinking. It was the first attack on US soil since Pearl Harbor. Al-Qaeda's use of fragile states in the Middle East and Africa to strengthen itself proved that fragile and failed states can also threaten states in the Developed North. This is due to the fact that the US has become a political opponent of many regimes, because adapting Western values, such as the functioning of democratic institutions, the rule of law, transparency, seeking low levels of corruption and respect for human rights, would have meant the end of authoritarian regimes (Herbst and Mills, 2003: 12-13). It is important to note that before the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the Sahel was at the bottom of the US foreign policy priorities, which amounted to the establishment and maintenance of embassies and the presence of senior state officials (Thurston, 2022: 10).

„The attack took place on American soil, but it was an attack on the heart and soul of the civilized world. And the world has come together to fight a new and different war, the first, and we hope the only one, of the 21st century. A war against all those who seek to export terror, and a war against those governments that support or shelter them.” President George W. Bush, October 11, 2001 (Global War on Terror, 2003)

In October 2001, with this strong speech Bush declared war on all political actors who were in some way linked to terrorism, i.e. who collaborated with al-Qaeda. It was the Global War on Terror that defined US Sahel policy (Global War on Terror, 2003). The practical manifestation of this was the Pan Sahel Initiative (PSI), which was created in 2002 out of fears that the following four states could harbour al-Qaeda cells, threatening US interests in the region: Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger. Between 2002 and 2004, the PSI had an annual budget of \$7.75 million, with US soldiers training six rapid reaction forces of 100-150 soldiers each, with the aim of enhancing regional cooperation, protecting borders from illicit trafficking, tracking the movement of international terrorists, and preventing terrorist groups from finding safe havens in the Sahel. This became the Trans Sahara Counter Terrorism Partnership (TSCTP) in 2005, which added the Magreb states to the former PSI states, as well as Nigeria and Senegal. With the accession of Burkina Faso in 2009, by the end of the decade, the partnership had ten member states. (Warner, 2014: 23-24).

The goal of the US was to develop a cooperation involving North African and West African states to fight terrorism together and prevent radicalisation. In addition to the USA, the EU and EU member states were also keen to involve themselves in the fight against radicals in the Sahel countries. A good example of which is the GAR-SI Sahel project (de Castro, Mayer, Gaona-Prieto and Bañares-Martin, 2024). This mission relies on US-backed capacity building in the areas of diplomacy, defence and development. Within the Department of State (DoS), the Bureau of African Affairs is responsible for the development, management and oversight of TSCTP projects. Collectively the Department of Defense (DoD), the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), and DoS have spent hundreds of millions of dollars on TSCTP projects in partner countries (U.S. Department of State, 2020: 1).

Barack Obama's two presidential terms set out the strategic goals that still guide US policy towards Africa today: (1) strengthen democratic institutions; (2) spur economic growth, trade, and investment; (3) advance peace and security; and (4) promote opportunity and development [Olsen, 2017: 79-80]. Nevertheless, it can be said that Africa, and with it in the Sahel, has not been a priority of US foreign policy. Continuing to operate through the institutions mentioned earlier, it was necessary to respond to new challenges, which led to the definition of strategic objectives. Yet, from the Obama administration onwards, US influence began to decline as it sought to minimise its presence, so that more rational, modern and coherent relationship-building was not pursued. The growing religiously extremist risk in the Sahel has increased the need for capacity-building of partner countries, which the US has tended to meet, but in doing so has begun to support regimes that clash with the strategy, notably the strengthening of democratic institutions. It was then that the US policy of interests began to diverge from the policy of values, the effects of which are

culminating at the time of writing this chapter (Downie, 2015). Overall, these eight years showed continuity with previous presidential strategies in US-Africa policy, without itself leaving any major changes or clear legacy. Thus, while development investment and aid have increased under the Obama administration and the US has achieved greater trade volumes with the Sahel, the relationship remains, from a US perspective, based on a system of resource-import economic relations (Olsen, 2017: 85-86).

Donald Trump's presidency has broke with Obama's policy in many areas, but this was not the case for African affairs. He continued to face the growing risk of the US being squeezed out of the continent and with it the Sahel. China, in particular, but also Russia, have gained increasing influence in the region. At the same time, Africa accounted for 1.4% of US trade by 2019 and only 0.7% of American FDI (Foreign Direct Investment) flowed to Africa, the worst rates in the previous decade. It was clear that this had to change and Africa had to be made attractive to investors again, which meant improving relations. John Bolton, then National Security Advisor, announced the Trump administration's draft Africa Strategy, which set out the Prosper Africa programme (Cook and Williams, 2020: 1). It is essentially an economic initiative to promote US-Africa investment and two-way trade, whereby it has been equipped with a full range of export promotion activities (Mysheta, Kurniawan and Nathanael, 2022: 86). Over 1,000 business leaders attended the U.S.-Africa Business Summit in Maputo in June 2019, where the USAID Director outlined the vision and purpose of Prosper Africa (Schneidman, 2020).

This was nothing less than a doubling of trade and investment between African countries and the US, giving a new shape to US economic policy in Africa. Although this initiative was supported by Biden after Trump, it is clear that it did not achieve the desired results in the first years. This is all the more worrying given that US-Africa trade volumes have fallen from \$142 billion in 2008 to \$64 billion in 2021. In recent decades, US-African relations have been based on an active but indirect presence in the humanitarian aid and security sectors, but in terms of economic investment, China has been ahead of the US in Africa and even more so in the Sahel since 2009 (Usman and Auth, 2022).

While the four core elements of US foreign policy are security, power, economic prosperity and influence, the African region has not seen a greater or more pronounced application of these elements, and Prosper Africa has been, in fact, another rhetorical element of a trade war against China under the Trump administration, despite the huge potential of the Sahel (Rudyak, 2024: 200-201). Trump has taken a significant military step against Racially and Ethnically Motivated Extremists (REMVE) in the Sahel by establishing a drone base in Agadez, Niger in 2019 with \$110 million in U.S. Air Base 201, which has provided significant support to

regional counterterrorism operations. In this period, it can be stated that the US has greatly expanded its military presence in the Sahel, not through direct presence, but by relying on security partnerships, primarily with France and the state forces, which Trump has further strengthened in the region. In parallel, he has sought to minimise the number of US troops on the continent. As a result, by 2021, the official number of US troops in Africa, which peaked at just over 5,000 in 2017, will have fallen to pre-9/11 levels, and in 2019 and 2020 to closer to 1,200-1,300 (Chin and Bartos, 2024: 125-126).

With Joe Biden in the White House, he had to face the political "trilemma" of Africa, of exporting the values of democracy as the main strategy, which then goes hand in hand with fighting extremism and competing with great powers. At the time of writing, the US does not seem to be able to address the 'trilemma' or to come up with a long-term strategy to reverse this trend. The coups in the Sahel in recent years have seriously damaged democratic institutions and in parallel, have led to a loss of confidence of the incumbent leaders in the French and, by extension, American forces, who have been unable to dismantle or at least seriously contain religiously extremist organisations for more than a decade. At the same time, the Sahel states are favouring the building of new alliances with the Chinese and the Russians (Chin and Bartos, 2024: 115-116).

In response, Biden laid out the basis for his Africa policy in the 2021 "U.S. Strategy Toward Sub-Saharan Africa". To implement them, it calls for enhanced cooperation with regional partners and for the US to use all its diplomatic, development and defence capabilities to help sub-Saharan Africa as effectively as possible. Given the short timeframe, and added to the implementation plan, the US's desire to simultaneously address immediate crises and threats as a short-term vision and strengthen sub-Saharan Africa as a long-term strategy to address global problems seems almost impossible (The White House, 2022: 4-5).

Diplomacy

It has already been mentioned that the existence of US embassies in all the states of the Sahel is a basic element of diplomatic relations, which presupposes a stable relationship between the two parties, with the interests of the sending state being represented in the light of the capabilities and positions of the receiving state. However, a measure of the importance of the relationship is the meeting of senior leaders, which is an indication to the other side of the seriousness of the intentions.

The importance of the relationship between the two sides is best illustrated by the visits of senior state leaders. Many foreign policy analysts point out that a newly elected prime minister or head of state's first trip abroad is a sign of the state's future foreign policy strategy. With this in mind, it is worth examining the frequency of visits

by US presidents to the Sahel and its trends. The following figure provides a comprehensive summary of U.S. presidential visits to Sub-Saharan Africa. It is important to emphasize that this list pertains to independent African states, which gained sovereignty in the 1960s.

President	Destination country	Date of arrival
Jimmy Carter	Nigeria	March 29, 1978
	Liberia	April 03, 1978
George H.W. Bush	Somalia	December 31, 1992
William J. Clinton	Ghana	March 23, 1998
	Uganda	March 23, 1998
	Rwanda	March 25, 1998
	South Africa	March 25, 1998
	Botswana	March 29, 1998
	Senegal	March 31, 1998
	Nigeria	August 26, 2000
	Tanzania	August 28, 2000
George W. Bush	Senegal	July 08, 2003
	South Africa	July 08, 2003
	Botswana	July 10, 2003
	Uganda	July 11, 2003
	Nigeria	July 11, 2003
	Benin	February 16, 2008
	Tanzania	February 16, 2008
	Rwanda	February 19, 2008
	Ghana	February 19, 2008

	Liberia	February 21, 2008
Barack Obama	Ghana	July 10, 2009
	Senegal	June 26, 2013
	South Africa	June 28, 2013
	Tanzania	July 01, 2013
	Senegal	July 02, 2013
	South Africa	December 09, 2013
	Kenya	July 24, 2015
	Ethiopia	July 26, 2015
Joseph R. Biden	Cape Verde	December 02, 2024
	Angola	December 02, 2024

Figure 1: US Presidents' visits to Africa by date, with visits to the Sahel region underlined in bold, based on the database of the U.S. Department of State (U.S. Department of State, 2024a)

From this point onward, the first presidential visit took place in 1978 under President Carter. However, during the Cold War, no further visits occurred, as Africa was not a primary focus at the time. President George H. W. Bush also traveled to the region primarily in response to the Somali crisis. Starting with the Clinton administration, visits to Sub-Saharan Africa became more frequent, often in the form of multi-country tours. The table highlights in bold those states that belong to the Sahel region under examination. It is evident that the two most significant partners have been Nigeria and Senegal, the former hosted the first visit, while the latter has been the most frequently visited Sahelian country by U.S. presidents.

During the Clinton-Bush-Obama era, the number of visits peaked, though the motivations varied: Clinton primarily pursued trade relations, Bush's visits were driven by the "War on Terror" strategy, while Obama combined both approaches in his engagement with Africa. However, in the subsequent years, a decline in presidential visits reflected the weakening of U.S.-Africa relations, indicating that the continent became a lower priority for U.S. foreign policy. This trend is exemplified by the fact that Donald Trump did not visit the region at all, while President Biden only traveled to two African states towards the end of his term. Of course, it cannot be ruled out that the two aforementioned presidents refrained from undertaking a Sub-Saharan tour due to

their age. However, the author adheres to the perspective that this decline is primarily a matter of shifting policy priorities.

Over the past decades, it has become increasingly common for powers seeking to build or maintain interests in Africa to organise summits, hosting several African leaders at once. The US has done no different. Under Barack Obama, the first US-Africa Leaders' Summit was held in August 2014, bringing together 45 African Heads of State, an unprecedented event. On the economic front, Obama promised a more dynamic engagement, welcoming increased contributions from private investors and financial institutions [Collinson, 2014]. On security and peacekeeping, he announced a programme to build up security sectors in the countries of the Western Sahel, with financial support, but only in close consultation and cooperation with host governments. The programme is called the Security Governance Initiative (SGI), which includes Mali, Niger and Nigeria from the Sahel region as partner countries. Many of its areas of activity have been transferred to the African Bureau of the Department of Defense (Watts, Noyes and Tarini, 2022: 6.). The conference was important in itself, as the President laid the foundations for a possible future regular US-Africa forum.

However, the second such summit had to wait until December 2022. Although the first meeting was historic, by 2022, the Asian powers were holding multiple Africa summits, leaving the US behind. By this time, the war in Ukraine had already left its mark on US foreign policy, which required a renewal of international relations on the African continent, as the continent's 54 countries represent a large voting base in international affairs. It was in this context that the second US-Africa Leaders' Meeting took place. The Biden administration sought to ensure the highest possible level of representation, so much so that it surpassed similar summits in Latin America or South East Asia. One of, if not the biggest statement of the meeting was the pledge of \$55 billion over the next three years to support the African Union's 2063 Agenda (Usman, Ovadia and Abayo, 2022). Clearly, the summit has shifted US relations in Africa, but its success will depend on the ability of the US to deliver on the promises made in the long term.

In view of the importance of the Sahel region, the US announced the creation of a new position in 2020, the Special Envoy for Africa's Sahel region, with the involvement of Donald Trump. The first Special Envoy was Peter Pham, who had been the Special Envoy for the Great Lakes region since 2018, but as the security situation in the Sahel became much worse, Pham was transferred (Pham, 2021: 420-431). The remit of this position is in fact to act as a bridge between the region and the US, to maximise US diplomatic efforts in the fight against religiously extremism and to be a facilitator of development and support for the region (Camara, 2021). From 2021, he

will no longer hold the position, which is currently vacant, according to the latest Department of State list (American Foreign Service Association, 2024).

Economy

The AGOA is one of the few programmes that survived the Democratic Party-Republican Party transition and is still a dominant feature of US-African economic policy. Here is the chart of the Sahel states' eligibility for AGOA.

Sahel countries	Period of AGOA eligibility	Current AGOA status
Burkina Faso	2005-2022	Not eligible
Cameroon	2001-2019	Not eligible
Central African Republic	2001-2003; 2017-2023	Not eligible
Chad	2001-	Eligible
Eritrea	2001-2003	Not eligible
Gambia	2003-2014; 2018-	Eligible
Guinea	2001-2009; 2011-2021	Not eligible
Mali	2001-2012; 2014-2021	Not eligible
Mauritania	2001-2005; 2007-2008; 2010-2018; 2024-	Eligible
Niger	2001-2009; 2011-2023	Not eligible
Nigeria	2005-	Eligible
Senegal	2001-	Eligible
South Sudan	2013-2014	Not eligible
Sudan	-	Not eligible

Figure 2: Periods of AGOA eligibility for the analysed Sahel states, based on the AGOA database (AGOA, 2024a)

It is clear that the vast majority of Sahel states do not currently meet the criteria and are therefore not eligible for the programme, for example Sudan has never had eligible status due to the political situation (AGOA, 2024a). Senegal is the only country in the region that has met the criteria from the start and Nigeria is the second country that has been consistently included in the list of partners. Nigeria is AGOA's most

important Sahel partner, with US exports amounting to \$2.5 billion and US imports almost \$5.7 billion, of which AGOA imports amounted to \$3.7 billion. For Senegal, US exports amounted to \$344 million, while US imports from Senegal amounted to 158 million dollars (AGO, 2024b). It is clear that Nigeria is the best off with the AGOA programme, thanks to its large territory, population and oil production.

From an economic and investment perspective, the United States African Development Foundation (USADF), created by Congress at the encouragement of President Carter in the late 1980s, is a prime example (The Government of the United States, 2022). It is an independent US government agency that invests in African organisations and small and medium-sized enterprises, helping to develop local economies, promote growth and overall social well-being (USADF 2024a). In total, USADF is present in eight of the countries surveyed: Burkina Faso, Guinea, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria and South Sudan. Nigeria is the largest of these countries and it shows in the figures, having received \$18.7 million to 188 enterprises between 2011 and 2021. The second largest is Senegal, where USADF invested \$11.4 million between 2011-2021 and provided support to 97 enterprises (USADF 2024b). It is clear that the biggest markets are in Nigeria and Senegal, which are also attracting more investors and thus more FDI. The USADF has consistently supported AGOA, as well as countries and entrepreneurs seeking to engage with US entrepreneurs. In the projected FY 2024 budget, Congress will provide \$46 million in funding, maintaining U.S. economic interest in Africa (USADF 2024c).

In addition, USAID Africa Trade and Investment (ATI) is also significant in the region, aiming to stimulate trade to and from the African continent, as well as trade within the continent. Activities through 2026 will create thousands of jobs on the African continent and within the United States, generate billions of dollars in exports and investment, mobilise private sector-led solutions and create a healthy business environment. The programme will run from 2021-2026, with more than \$464 million in projected funding over that time, covering the entire continent, not just the Sahel (USAID, 2023). Through the ATI, USAID provides financial and technical assistance to businesses, entrepreneurs and partner governments. The ATI also helps advance priority initiatives such as the Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment, Prosper Africa, Feed the Future, Digital Transformation with Africa, and the Global Alliance for Trade Facilitation. Since its launch in 2021, Prosper Africa and USAID have used the ATI to facilitate more than 759 trade transactions and \$741.4 million in trade deals, and mobilized an additional \$291 million in private sector resources to advance trade capacity and economic development goals on the continent (Tai, 2024: 71-72).

It is important to mention the Prosper Africa initiative, one of the few programmes that has been supported by both a Republican and a Democratic

president and which still exists today. Between 2017 and 2024, significant investment in several Sahel countries will be demonstrated through the programme. The three most important partners are: Senegal where 6 investors have invested \$325 million; Cameroon, where 14 investors have invested around \$1 billion; and in Nigeria, where 231 investors have invested \$11 billion (Prosper Africa, 2024). The most important Sahel state in the initiative is clearly Nigeria, which alone receives more investment than all the other states listed combined.

In the field of economic relations, the biggest forum is the U.S.-Africa Business Summit, which is the apex of U.S.-Africa business relations, a platform where political, business or private sector leaders from the U.S. and Africa come together. The goal is to create an environment where new business and investment opportunities can be explored. The Summit, which has attracted an average of 1,000 participants from 40 countries since its inception, including 46 heads of state and/or government, is a testament to the dynamic and evolving US-Africa business environment. The first Summit took place in 1997 and the last, the 16th, scheduled for May 2024 (Corporate Council on Africa, 2024a). The Summit brings together over 1500 political and business leaders from the US and Africa, including heads of state, international investors, US and African government officials and multilateral stakeholders (Corporate Council on Africa, 2024b). In contrast to the political summits, there is a regularity here that makes it an ideal platform for the aforementioned US-Africa economic channels.

Military and security

From a military and security perspective, the US has adopted a strategy of Security Sector Assistance (SSA) in response to growing instability, the spread of terrorism and the growing prevalence of REMVE organisations. Rather than deploying large numbers of US forces, as it has done in East Asia, Europe and the Middle East, it has invested in building the security capabilities of its African partners, thereby increasing cooperation with partner countries. Within Africa, the Sahel region is one of the most critical areas of concern, as REMVE organisations linked to al-Qaeda and DAESH have gained ground over the past decade. For this reason, it is a key region for the SSA strategy (Watts, Johnston, Lane, Mann, McNerney and Brooks, 2018: 1-11). A very good example of this is the conflict in Darfur in Sudan from 2003, whereas it did not intervene directly in the conflict but was one of the main donor states to African Union Mission in Sudan (AMIS) (Besenyő, 2021: 7-8). In close cooperation with the African Union, the US has provided substantial assistance in setting up the mission's camps and has supported operational work through military advisers (Besenyő, 2006: 41-42).

SSA is an official term that refers to all US material and programmatic efforts to influence, engage and support partner states' security institutions. SSA encompasses

all related terms, such as security force assistance, security cooperation, building partner capacity, security sector reform, defence institution building, and foreign internal defence. SSA includes all types of cooperation with security sector partners, including the military, police and judiciary, and related government and civil society actors. The Department of State and the Department of Defence are primarily involved in the implementation of the strategy, the latter more in the planning processes. In Africa, the US contingents rely on the SSA due to the limited financial and human resources available to achieve US objectives. At the top of these objectives are the fight against terrorism and violent extremist organisations, the maintenance of internal peace and support for regional peacekeeping operations. The SSA takes many forms in support of these objectives. The vast majority of expenditures and programs provide equipment and training to build the tactical capacity of partner forces. Much smaller programs provide advisory support to national security institutions through professional military education (Watts, Johnston, Lane, Mann, McNerney and Brooks, 2018: 1-11).

The TSCTP, which covers mainly the western half of the Sahel but not the eastern half, was described earlier. To this end, the Partnership for Regional East Africa Counterterrorism (PREACT) was created by the US in 2009 as a multi-year and multi-layered programme implemented by the US to promote capacity building and cooperation between military and civilian actors to maximise the effectiveness of the overall fight against terrorism. Partners include East African states, but also Sudan and South Sudan from the Sahel region (U.S. Department of State, 2024b; Mkuti, 2022: 80-84). It is important to highlight the two main military bases of the US, which determine not only Sahel but also Africa's policy. Djibouti is home to the largest US military camp, Camp Lemonnier, which is suitable for preparing air, land or sea operations in eastern Africa, but which is primarily a naval facility. The base accommodates some 4,000 US and allied military and civilian personnel, as well as contractors from the Department of Defense (Pham, 2014: 262-263). The base covering West Africa was located in Niamey in Niger, which had nearly 1,000 personnel and is known as Air Base 101, while the other was located in Agadez as Air Base 201. However, the wave of coups that has been unfolding since 2020 has reached Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, the latter in 2023, leaving the US at a crossroads. In preserving the value of democratic institutions, interests dictate that the main role and is to support counterterrorism, sometimes helping the leaders who have come to power through a coup (Taspinar, 2024). This dilemma was resolved by the Nigerien leadership when, in March 2024, the Niger leadership suspended military cooperation with the US, which the Americans accepted. This was due to the tendency of the coup regimes to be pro-Russian, and everyone had broken treaties with the former colonial French, forcing the Europeans to withdraw between 2022-2023 (Ray, 2024). It was to be expected that the US forces assisting them would suffer a similar

fate, which is what happened in 2024 with the evacuation of bases in Niger. This process began on May 19 following the mutual establishment of withdrawal conditions and continued with the withdrawal of U.S. forces and assets from Air Base 101 in Niamey on July 7, 2024, and Air Base 201 in Agadez on Aug. 5, 2024. The full withdrawal took place in autumn 2024 (United States Africa Command, 2024).

The same happened in Chad, where in May 2024, more than half of the US troops stationed at the French military base in the capital N'Djamena left the country and relocated to Germany, leaving less than 100 US troops. This leaves no military base in the Sahel from which to launch or support counter-terrorism operations, meaning that the US has been largely squeezed out of the western part of the Sahel from a military point of view. However, after the presidential elections in spring 2024, the Chadian president announced that he was again open to US cooperation and would allow the return of US troops. This would also be important for the US, especially as Nigeria has stated that it is not interested in hosting US forces, leaving Chad as the only location close to the REMVE and suitable for offensive operations. However, President Mahamat Déby himself came to power in a coup before elections in 2021, although he won the 2024 elections (Lionel, 2024). The big question for the Americans will be whether democratic values or military interests will prevail in Chad.

The Future

In short, the US is gradually being pushed out of the Sahel, thanks to a wave of coups in the west, where most of the leaders are disappointed with or opposed to the Western presence: this led to the withdrawal of the French and subsequently the US forces that helped them. Yet the undisputed fact is that the AFRICOM base in Djibouti shows a determined US presence in the eastern part of the Sahel, which it has not yet been able to establish in the west. From an economic point of view, US-African relations are fruitful, but the Chinese investment and economic presence is causing a serious loss of prestige for US economic policy, which, given the trend, is worsening. In terms of diplomatic relations, the Obama-era summit was a milestone, but by the second summit, the other major powers had caught up and surpassed the US initiative in frequency, another sign that sub-Saharan Africa is not a top priority for the US.

The re-election of Donald Trump could have a major impact on the current Africa policy, especially regarding Trump's rhetoric, which is full of contradictions. What is clear is that sub-Saharan Africa, and thus the Sahel, will not be at the top of the US foreign policy agenda but this statement remains a prediction, as, for example, the appointment of Tibor Nagy to the US Department of State suggests the opposite (Raynaldo, 2025). He has considerable experience in US-Africa relations and there is no question that he can provide significant information to Marco Rubio and Donald Trump, the question is how much the cabinet will use this opportunity.

At the time of writing, it appears that there are three more important regions that the US is currently focused on and will remain so. In no particular order: the first is Ukraine (the war and the monitoring of a possible armistice, peace agreement and reconstruction); the second is the Middle East (and with it the normalisation not only of Israeli-Arab relations but also the isolation of Iran and the imposition of tougher sanctions, as Trump was not soft on Iran in his previous term); third, the Far East (which includes US allies and China as the main competitor and a source of danger in Trump's eyes). The core strategy of the incoming president is based on the slogan 'America First', to 'Make America Great Again'. The question is how this would be achieved. In this context, Africa could be a battleground in a trade and great power battle, as the valuable metals and energy resources found there will be important for both sides in the future.

But it is also clear that the US will not commit further apart in terms of foreign military outlays in Africa directly unless serious US strategic interests are at stake. The author's personal remark is that the US leadership is beginning to look a bit like it did before September 11, 2001: it is starting to believe that terrorist organisations in fragile or weak states are not capable of directly threatening the US motherland. Of course, a big question will be if the presence in the Sahel is reinvigorated as a result of what. The author considers the most realistic scenario is that the main conflict zones mentioned earlier are settled and when these do not need as much manpower and material capacity, the US can focus on other regions, including the Sahel. What is needed first is a more stable Middle East and an end to the war in Ukraine. But overall, a stagnation similar to the first Trump term can be expected in Africa policy over the next four years.

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PART II: GLOBAL AND NATIONAL RELATIONSHIPS WITH THE REGION

CHAPTER 8

China and the Sahel

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Abstract

China's presence in Africa is not a new phenomenon. Nonetheless, in the last twenty years, China's economic rise, diplomatic activism, infrastructure projects, concessional loans, dynamic trade relations and growing military cooperation have contributed to deepening its footprint on the Africa. Since 2013, Xi Jinping's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has consolidated even more China's influence there.

In the Sahel, from Senegal to Sudan, while competing with French and other Western nations interests, China's presence has had to face a more insecure environment. Beijing has taken part in United Nations peacekeeping operations in Mali and South Sudan; it has also participated in the fight against Ebola in Liberia and Sierra Leone. It has supplied small quantity of weapons and offered training to limited groups of officers. However, its role in the security of the region has remained modest.

This chapter will explore China's policy towards the Sahel in the context of growing anti-French and anti-US sentiments and an increasing Russian security role. It will analyze how much this changing geopolitical and security context is serving Beijing's interests, its economic presence, its diplomatic influence as well as its military cooperation. It will finally assess how much China is promoting both multipolarity and multilateral solutions to the challenges of the Sahel, together with the African Union and subregional organization as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS).

Keywords: China, Sahel, BRI, geopolitical rivalry, Russia, multipolarity, multilateralism, African Union, ECOWAS.

Introduction

Today, China is present virtually everywhere in Africa. The only country that kept diplomatic relations with Taiwan is e-Swatini, a small kingdom sandwiched between South Africa and Mozambique. Another exception since 2020 is Somaliland but this de facto state which split from Somalia in 1991 has not been recognized by the international community. China's diplomatic network is particularly dense, with large embassies in all other 53 countries, including even the smallest ones such as Cape Verde, Lesotho or Sao Tome and Principe.

China's economic footprint is even bigger, being now one of Africa's most important trade partner (US\$295 billion in 2024) on a par with the European Union and way ahead of the USA or India. Launched by Chinese president Xi Jinping in 2013, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has directly contributed to enhancing China's trade relations and economic presence in Africa, particularly in the infrastructure sector, although more as a lender than an investor.

While China's presence in Africa goes back to the 1960s and the wave of African independence movements through to the 1980s, it concentrated on supporting armed liberation movements and providing various forms of assistance, including medical and agricultural, to countries that it considered as socialist or otherwise friendly such as Algeria, Guinea, Mali, Tanzania or Zambia. In the 1970s, it built between the two latter nations a railway, the TAZARA, that has long remained the symbol of China-Africa cooperation. It is only in the 1990s that China's companies started to become involved in major construction projects in or trade with Africa and more Chinese, including contractual workers and private entrepreneurs, started to move to Africa. Before the BRI was launched, China had already participated in many meaningful infrastructure projects such as the east-west highway in Algeria launched in 2007 and completed in 2023 or the Addis Ababa-Djibouti railway initiated in 2011 and completed in 2018.

This growing Chinese presence has been accompanied by a genuine diplomatic activism: Since 1991, every January, Beijing's Foreign Minister pays a visit to several African countries. In 2000, China established the Forum of China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), a platform that gathers Chinese and African leaders every three years and announces ambitious assistance packages. At the latest FOCAC held in Beijing in 2024, the Chinese government committed a financial envelope of US\$50 billion. Moreover, except during Covid, Xi Jinping has visited more African capitals than any other head of state.

China pursues multiple objectives in Africa. It looks for diplomatic support, in the United Nations and elsewhere, banking on the large number of votes the continent holds in intergovernmental organizations. Importing from Africa many of the raw

materials and natural resources its economy needs (bauxite, copper, cobalt, gold, lithium, oil, tropical woods, uranium, etc.), it also finds in this continent a growing market ready to buy its cheaply finished products and machineries. China is also ready to provide funding and expertise for all the infrastructure projects that Africa badly needs, creating asymmetrical bounds of dependency that contribute to deepening its influence on local governments and elites. Simultaneously, it tries to expand its soft power, opening multiple Confucius Institutes, developing, in a catch-all strategy, party-to-party relations between the Chinese Communist Party and many African political groupings and exporting, not its development model as such but its development methods and industrial standards. Finally, as a great power, it wants to take a growing part in Africa's security, participating in a more meaningful way, sending since 2012 combat troops, to several UN peacekeeping operations, such as the Mission multidimensionnelle intégrée des Nations Unies au Mali (MINUSMA) in Mali until 2023 or the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) in South Sudan since 2012. The opening in 2017 of China's first naval base overseas in Djibouti can be considered a turning point in this domain. China also sells or donates an increasing quantity of cheaper weapons to Africa.

Today, China is clearly one of the Sahel region's major partners, ahead of France in terms of trade and infrastructure projects, happy to let Russia playing a bigger role in the security of some of its countries (Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger). But China also wants to keep good or decent relations with both France and the US in this part of Africa.

1. Geopolitical Context

The significance of the region, along with China's presence and interests, can only truly be understood in the geopolitical context, which is closely linked to historical development: by the second half of the 20th century, the states in the Sahel region had ended colonial rule and gained their independence, but the legacies of the colonial era had deeply infiltrated the societies of the Sahel region, inheriting borders, administrative-political structures and economic dependency, through exposure to colonial powers (Vörös, 2024: 52). In addition to the complex crises (political instability, terrorism, poverty, famine, youth bulge, climate change, economic misery), this enduring financial-commercial-economic control had a significant impact on the states. This is the so-called *Françafrique*, "a unique connection between the French state and their former colonies in Africa, open to both positive and negative interpretations, it is a system which was built by France as a way in which the former patron-state held the necessary instruments to fulfill its objectives in all its areas of interest." (Lupulescu, 2019: 287). Nonetheless, this close relationship with France has also helped these former colonies to become more viable nation-states, something that was far from being assured when they became independent.

In this system, through financial control as well as various trade agreements and treaties – thanks to which French companies and multinational corporations had a significant presence in the region and often enjoyed a monopolistic position, further increasing French economic control – France continued to exert considerable influence over the states of the Sahel region (Vörös, 2024: 53). China, as a leading state of the Global South and a power once humiliated by Western powers, is now able to present itself as a partner rather than an exploiter to the affected states, emphasizing cooperation and multilateral interests (which will be further elaborated upon later). This approach claims to seek a more equal relationship with the regional states, making Chinese loans, investments and projects more attractive compared to the European or IMF and World Bank ones, which submit to more rules and restrictions, such as good governance and respect for human rights, or other priorities, as education and poverty alleviation. While these models have been sometimes criticized for being too demanding and offering a ‘one size fits all’ solution (Wissenbach, 2008: 57), China (amongst other countries) has offered an alternative to that.

In recent years, and indeed for more than a decade now, China has skillfully exploited this and has emerged as a balancing player specifically in Africa—one that can increasingly be described as a new normative power in more and more cases. China is not the only newcomer and alternative actor: once again, following the period of the Cold War bipolar world order, Russian military interest has reemerged, this time in the form of private armies with the not always that hidden aim of destabilizing the region—an objective that does not necessarily align with Beijing’s global interests. Other emerging powers as India or Türkiye also constitute another option for Africa, particularly in the economic realm.

At this point though, we should emphasize that China and other actors have not displaced the relevant external powers, they have rather been “entering a partial vacuum”²⁸ created by the failure or limits of Western efforts. In 2021, many observers assumed that the deployment of the Kremlin-linked Wagner mercenary group into Mali was intended to disrupt French leadership and European strategies in the Sahel. Yet the Wagner Group entered an environment where these strategies had failed after a decade-long investment in the security sector. The series of military coups that took place in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger between 2021 and 2023 undermined the credibility and track record of international support to Sahelian militaries, given that Western assistance had neither improved security in the region nor produced effective and accountable militaries.” (USIP, 2024: 17-18).

²⁸ Benandullah does not even consider it a vacuum, calling it only a decreasing relevance of these actors, since they still have presence and interest in the region (Benandullah, 2024).

However, Beijing also faces challenges and limitations, such as in the security and military sectors, where its significant dependency can be highlighted: it currently lacks the capacity to carry out independent military operations, and thus relies on multilateral solutions in this regard, including MINUSMA in Mali between 2013 and 2023.

The consequence is concerning for the West, and particularly for Europe: the West's slow economic growth and in some cases its stagnation or decline as well as its inability to solve Africa's woes have generated a high degree of anti-Western sentiment in the region's states, which materialized in flag burnings (French and even EU flags were destroyed) and the appearance instead of Russian flags, and even in some cases Chinese ones, during the coups that took place in the early 2020s.

While this obvious eastward shift could be favorable to Beijing's interests, the destabilizing efforts from the Russian side have not been followed by steps to create stability²⁹, and China is not capable of achieving it independently; its military-hard power is limited in this regard. However, since China's economic and political goals lie in the expansion of globalization, and ensuring that globalization benefits more regions, it has been more interested in establishing a stable political situation that enables economic cooperation beneficial to its interests – quite similar to other regions within Africa. Lafargue also highlighted, why Beijing is looking for stability:

“The economic development of the region is in the Chinese interest, in order to avoid the institutional disruptions (notably the arrival to power of religiously motivated regimes) which will be detrimental to it. The crackdown against the Uyghur minority caused China to be the object of terrorist group threats. Concerned with protecting its expatriates and its interests, China is more involved in the political stabilization and securitization operations.” (Lafargue, 2018: 10). Without this stability, Chinese investments and capital will not arrive either.

In this geopolitical environment, it appears that while emerging external powers and regional middle powers are increasingly showing serious interest in the region, the significance and influence of traditional actors on the processes is continuously diminishing. For its part, China has so far complemented Western measures aimed at strengthening security and stability, but it is currently unable to implement such solutions on its own.

²⁹ “China's strategy in Africa relies extensively on long-term investments and the promotion of cross-regional connectivity, but has also featured limited forays into addressing regional security challenges. Russia's strategy in Africa, meanwhile, has weaker commercial foundations and is much more opportunistic. This is because Moscow pairs transactional deals in the mining, energy and defence sectors with tactical illustrations of its resistance to Western norms and military backing for authoritarian regimes in crisis” (Ramani, 2021: 4).

2. China's Strategic Interests in the Sahel

2.1. Political presence

In the Sahel, the People's Republic of China (PRC)'s presence first concentrated in militant or leftist countries as Sekou Touré's Guinea which normalized its relations with Beijing in 1959, or Mali, a one-party state with strong socialist leanings, which did the same a year later. Other Sahelian states took more time to establish diplomatic relations with the PRC, for example Mauritania in 1965 and Cameroon and Nigeria in 1971. In the 1990s and 2000s, some countries of the region retained or switched back relations to Taiwan (officially the Republic of China), slowing down the PRC's growing presence in the region: Niger until 1996, Senegal until 2005, Chad until 2006, Gambia until 2016 and Burkina Faso until 2017.

But today, China's political presence is clearly visible, first of all by the number and the size of the its embassies in each capital city of the region's states. As elsewhere, Beijing has remained agnostic about the nature of the political regime it deals with. Of course, it has developed deeper relations with regional heavyweights such as Nigeria or raw-material exporting countries as Chad (oil), Guinea (bauxite) and Niger (uranium). Nonetheless, China has been keen to be inclusive, regularly sending official delegations to all the Sahel countries. Moreover, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has established party-to-party relations with all the ruling parties and some of the opposition parties of the region.

China has been a strong supporter of ECOWAS (Economic Community of West African States), a regional organization including 15 countries. In 2018, it decided to fund with a CIDCA (China International Development and Cooperation Agency) grant the construction of a new ECOWAS headquarter in Abuja (US\$31.6 million). Started in 2022, the construction should be completed in November 2025. China has remained neutral after four ECOWAS states (Mali, Guinea, Burkina Faso and Niger) had their membership suspended in 2021-2023 for having organized anti-democratic coups and three of them (Mali, Guinea and Burkina Faso) had decided in January 2024 to withdraw from the organization. It has kept good relations with all these countries, taking advantage, as Russia, of their souring relationship with France, their former colonizer, and the European Union (EU).

The best evidence of China's catch-all diplomacy has been its successful promotion of the BRI. To date, barring Burkina Faso, all Sahel countries have signed a BRI MOU with China, most of them in 2018-2020, with Cameroon following in 2023 (Green Finance & Development Center, 2024). Before and after the coup in 2022, Burkina Faso had shown its willingness to "actively participate in the BRI cooperation" (Xinhua, 2024).

Held for the first time in Dakar, Senegal in December 2021, the FOCAC summit has been another occasion for China to strengthen its political and economic links with the region. Although, because of the pandemic, Xi Jinping gave his opening speech via video link, he committed another \$40 billion over three years to the whole continent. While the overall envelope was smaller (it had been \$60 billion in 2018) and heralded a reduction of infrastructure project fundings, it gave priority to the fight against desertification – the “Africa Green Great Wall” – a crucial preoccupation of the Sahel, and the promotion of African exports, an important way for the region’s countries to try to rebalance their trade with China.

2.2. Economic Engagement

Trade between China and the countries of the Sahel has increased rapidly since 2000, spurred both by African exports of raw materials and imports of finished products and machineries. As a result, most countries of the region have a large trade deficit with China. Guinea, because of the rapid rise of its bauxite exports to China is the only exception: in 2024, its imports from China amounted to \$3.9 billion while its exports were \$11.5 billion. Even the region’s largest economy, Nigeria, sells much less to China than it buys from it (\$3 billion against \$18.9 billion in 2024) because the latter does not get any oil from a country that, on the other hand, has a large population eager to buy cheaper Chinese products. The appetite has contributed to jeopardizing some local industries, for example in the textile sector. Senegal is in a similar situation, importing much more from China (\$4.7 billion in 2024) than it can export to the country (\$1.1 billion).

As in the rest of Africa, and more widely the Global South, China’s economic engagement in the Sahel is dominated by infrastructure projects. Chinese companies continue to build stadiums and other visible facilities, for example the Grand Theatre in Dakar. But today, they have mainly been involved in large-scale construction projects in almost all countries of the region. They concentrate more on oil extraction and production as pipelines and mini-refineries in Niger and Chad as well as coal-fired power plant in Niger (Cabestan, 2018). They have built an hydro-electric dam in Guinea and large wind farms in Mauritania. They have also been involved in transports and communications modernization, constructing ports in Mauritania, Guinea, Sierra Leone, Nigeria and Cameroon (Container News, 2024). They have also achieved railway projects, particularly in Nigeria. The Lagos – Ibadan line was completed in 2021. Lagos’s mass transit railway line and Abuja light railway both opened in 2024. The Kaduna to Kano railway project, mainly funded by Chinese banks should be finished in 2026. Chinese companies’ involvement in the huge Simandou iron mine project in Guinea and the construction of a railway line to the coast, together with Rio Tinto and the Guinean government is most recent example of China’s increasing presence in the industrial extractive sector.

According to Boston University's Chinese Loans to Africa Database (2024), in value Chinese loans to the ten Sahel countries from 2000 to 2023 (\$24.6 billion out of a total of \$182.3 billion to Africa) have concentrated on transportation (32 loans amounting to \$11.2 billion, including 11 to Nigeria, \$6.2 billion), energy (\$4.2 billion, including \$1.5 billion to Guinea, \$1.2 billion to Nigeria and 1 billion to Cameroon) and information and communication technologies (\$4.2 billion including \$1.4 billion to Nigeria and 1.2 to Cameroon). Other significant loans are related to water, sanitation and waste (\$1.6 billion) and industries and trade services (\$1.3 billion). Most loans were provided between 2010 and 2018 and since 2019 there has been a sharp decline, which coincide with the scaling down of the BRI and the priority given to so-called "small and beautiful" projects.

One of the reasons for this reduction is African countries growing and unsustainable external debt. In none of these countries, except Cameroon, China is the major creditor; but all of them have growing difficulties of paying back their loans. For example, in Nigeria, China represents only \$5 billion of the country's \$42 billion outstanding debt (Debt Management Office of Nigeria, 2024). Some reports indicate that 61% to 65% of Cameroon's external debt is owed to China, delaying some projects as the Douala-Yaounde express way (Guardian Post, 2024). However, this percentages relates only to bilateral debt. Actually, China holds only 22.4% to 25.1% of Cameroon's total external debt, ahead of France (8.9%) but way behind multilateral lenders 45.9% (Business in Cameroon, 2024; IMF, 2023). Moreover, while Cameroon faces risks of debt distress, its external debt remains sustainable, representing only 30.8% of its GDP (IMF, 2023).

In contrast, China's direct investments in the Sahel have been limited. Only Nigeria sits among the top ten destinations with a stock of around \$2 billion Chinese investments, mainly concentrated in the two industrial parks built outside of Lagos.

Yet, China's growing economic footprint in the Sahel has contributed to increasing its influence to the detriment of the region's more traditional partners.

3. Promoting Multipolarity and Multilateral Solutions

3.1. The global approach to multipolarity

In the 2020s, it is still clearly visible that China does not yet possess the hard power, the military-security tools, necessary to sustain its ambitions and continues to rely on the political goodwill of the international community (and in many cases, the United States). From a global perspective, we can see that the geopolitical, economic, and military actions (whether we think of AUKUS, the case of Huawei, or the ban on chip exports) carried out by the United States in recent years have been and continue to be clearly directed against Beijing—at a time when China is still unable to confront Washington. In this transforming world, it is also clear that Chinese actions aim for

reforming, increasing its influence in and possibly leading the international system. China's support of the existing international order and regional organizations as ASEAN or the African Union as well as its efforts to create new regional organizations as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization or FOCAC illustrate this ambition. China's plans also stem from an understanding of the logic of an interdependent, globalized world. Through this, China advocates for the creation of a political (and economic) environment where it can cooperate with like-minded partner states, while also contributing to the formation of a multipolar world order dominated by regional powers but not fundamentally restructured (Vörös, 2022).

3.2. The Sahel region in this context

This multipolar approach also determines and defines China's relations with the Sahel region. Besides its bilateral ties with each country of the region, China is engaged with the African Union, ECOWAS and on a rhetorical level supported the G5 Sahel as well – although until 2017 Burkina Faso had diplomatic relations with Taiwan. Besides these African initiatives, China took part in the United Nations Peacekeeping operation in Mali, MINUSMA, from 2013 to 2023.

Beijing supports all of these institutions in their efforts to stabilize the region and turns towards these multilateral initiatives when targeting regional challenges.

3.3. Challenges and Opportunities

As we can see, China's policy stems from the fact that it is still unable to independently defend its global interests, thus applying a relatively mixed approach in its multilateral and bilateral relations. This mixed approach means that Beijing is ready to both support regional organizations and manage bilateral ties with the Sahel states, but a grand strategy is still missing from Beijing's approach: in 2022 China (together with Russia) "blocked a UN motion by France to support ECOWAS-led sanctions against the junta in Mali" (Benandullah, 2024) – which eventually blocked the ongoing mediation process as well, a process that actually benefitted China's economic interests. Later, the exit of three Sahel states from the regional organization weakened regional cooperation – threatening China's possible economic benefits as well: China is "inconsistent in its responsiveness to regional groups" (Benandullah, 2024).

Nevertheless, this role has both cautioned Beijing and, in certain cases, only been able to offer rhetorical solutions to the challenges, urging the international or even the African community to act, without taking action itself. Regarding rhetorical solutions Benabdallah highlighted two cases, when Chinese permanent representatives to the United Nations called for constructive help for Mali and support for the G5 Sahel, consecutively in 2019 and in 2022, yet "interestingly enough, China itself has yet to help the G5 Sahel Taskforce" (2024).

Limitation and a cautious approach can actually threaten its economic and trade relations, since Beijing is not ready to act alone, always opting for multilateral solutions. Connected to this though, we can identify opportunities as well: while Beijing is hesitant around unilateral solutions and supports multilateral operations, especially United Nations Peacekeeping Operations (UNPKOs), supporting, backing and strengthening the global peace initiatives.

Altogether it is visible, that China's more cautious approach is originating from its relative lack of experience in military operations and also a lack of capacities and will. But slowly China's security role is expanding within this multilateral approach as well, while remaining still rather limited.

4. Hard power: China's Role in Regional Security

4.1. Peacekeeping Operations – From abstentionism to active participation

China's involvement in the UN peacekeeping missions in Mali in 2013 was in two respects a new development, underscoring a growing willingness to play a bigger role in Africa and the Sahel's security (Cabestan, 2018). Firstly, as in South Sudan a year earlier, Beijing decided to include combat troops (a People's Liberation Army's infantry battalion) among its peacekeepers. Secondly, China endorsed a UN mandate that was more ambitious than the previous ones – restoring peace in the north of Mali – and signaled a partial evolution in Chinese diplomacy to the 'responsibility to protect'. Nonetheless, stationed in Gao, Chinese peacekeepers remained risk-averse, particularly after their base had been attacked in 2016 (one fatality, four wounded). They rarely left their camp, concentrating on providing medical services to the local population to improve their image. MINUSMA came to an end in late June 2023 after the new Malian military government asked it be dismantled and the PLA detachment left the country at the end of the year. China's contribution to the MINUSMA should not be exaggerated: made of 426 personnel, the Chinese contingent represented just 3% of the total mission (13,800 in 2023).

At the same time, these commitments clearly indicate how China has reassessed its role in ensuring security on the continent (and in the world) and how, with the broader manifestation of its interests, the role it has taken in establishing stability has become indispensable for it.

Previously an "abstaining" state, China has not only accepted collaborations under the auspices of the UN but also become an active participant of its missions (Vörös-Tarrósy, 2020) – due, as we have already noted, to the importance of achieving multilateral goals alongside security.

4.2. Military Cooperation

China's role in security, however, is not so straightforward. As we have already mentioned, maintaining stability is important for Beijing's economic and political interests; however, a prominent element of these economic interests is the country's role in the global arms trade.

According to the latest data of the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), in the latest data-window (2019-2023) in sub-Saharan Africa³⁰ China “overtook Russia as the region’s main supplier of major arms”, accounting for 19% of the deliveries (SIPRI, 2024).

The reason why this role in arms deliveries is important is the accusation that is often targeted against China, namely that it delivers weapons to conflict zones without any considerations (Devecioglu–Akçomak, 2024). But this, along with the relative cheapness of weapons compared to Western prices, makes the country a popular partner.

For China, this region has not been the most significant in recent years in terms of arms deliveries; previously, greater attention was paid to the southern and eastern African regions, as well as the central African region (primarily the Democratic Republic of the Congo). However, the marginalization of western powers and the strengthening of economic interests have brought this West African region (some of which is part of the Sahel) to the forefront as well.

It is no coincidence that “Norinco, China’s largest weapons producer, opened a new sales office in Senegal in August 2023. The company, which supplies small arms, artillery and armored vehicles, already had offices in Angola, Nigeria and South Africa, and there are plans to establish more offices in Côte d’Ivoire and Mali. Norinco’s arrival in Senegal shows that Chinese companies are very opportunistic and apt at filling competitive gaps” (ADF, 2024). This move clearly indicates the growing relevance of the region in future arms sales and security related issues.

Based upon the numbers, in the 21st century, China was responsible for 26.6% of the arms exported to the analyzed countries, into the Sahel region with Mauritania, Chad, Cameroon and Nigeria being the most relevant players, and Senegal, Guinea, Mali and Niger also buying Chinese arms, though Beijing is not among the most relevant actors (*See Table 1.*).

³⁰ The Sahel Region is included in SIPRI’s sub-Saharan Africa category.

Country	2000-2021 TIV, Chinese export to analyzed country	2000-2021, % of total exports to analyzed country	2022 TIV, Chinese export to analyzed country	2022, % of total exports to analyzed country	2023 TIV, Chinese export to analyzed country	2023, % of total exports to analyzed country	Total analyzed period, %
<i>Senegal</i>	37	12	0	0	6	3.8	8.8
<i>Gambia</i>	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
<i>Mauritania</i>	90	49	0	0	0	0	49
<i>Guinea</i>	1	2.4	0	0	0	0	2.4
<i>Mali</i>	14	6	0	0	17	21	8.2
<i>Burkina Faso</i>	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
<i>Niger</i>	4	4.7	0	0	0	0	3
<i>Chad</i>	87	21	0	0	0	0	20
<i>Cameroon</i>	213	59	0	0	0	0	58
<i>Nigeria</i>	471	29	37	68	25	42	31
Share of China in total exports to the Sahel Region between 2000-2023							26.6

Table 1: Chinese arms sales to the Sahel countries, Chinese export to countries and the share of this trade within total imports

Legend: TIV - Figures are in millions of SIPRI trend-indicator values (TIVs). TIV is a measure of the volume of international transfers of major arms helping international comparisons.

Source: SIPRI Arms Transfers Database, 2024.

What is also visible from Table 1, and that partially goes against the criticism aimed at China, is that out of the five countries that had a coup d'état in the 2021-2023 period (Guinea, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Chad), only Mali was importing Chinese weapons (more than one fifth of their imports were coming from China in 2023). Yet it is too early to tell whether China is more cautious who it supplies or if there are other

reasons behind the decision (although it is visible, that Türkiye became a quite relevant actor, if we analyze these same states) (SIPRI Arms Transfers Database, 2024). It should be also noted that some of China's arms transfers to Sahel countries are made of donations which do not appears in statistics. This is particularly the case in countries such as Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger (Cabestan, 2019).

China's approach and caution are worth highlighting because arms trade, especially under unstable conditions, has negative security-threatening consequences, such as through the terrorism that particularly threatens the region.

So, for now, the military cooperation appears to be on the commercial side; there are no unilateral military actions or interventions by China. But because of the region's security challenges, China might be pushed to become more engaged and active in this sector as well, especially since "there might be interruptions in the flow of critical raw materials that help support China's industrial economy or threats to the growing Chinese presence in Africa" (Shinn–Eisenman, 2012: 163-164).

4.3. Limitations of China's Security Role

Altogether, China's security role in the Sahel is rather limited. Chinese companies are usually protected by local private security firms and sometimes Chinese companies made of former PLA or public security officers. In 2019 China provided some symbolic financial support (\$45 million and \$1.5 million for the operation of the permanent secretariat) to the G5 Sahel, a framework created in 2014 and based in Nouakchott for coordinating security policy in the Sahel (Cheick, 2022). But in 2022, Mali left the organization, followed a year later by Burkina Faso and Niger. As a result, in December 2023, Mauritania and Chad, its two remaining members, announced its imminent dissolution.

But even China's participation in the MINUSMA should not be exaggerated. China was:

"...Not a significant security provider in Mali but rather a keen observer and modest donor. None of its activities presents a potential interference with national and international strategies, nor does it make an indispensable contribution to the stability of the country. Ultimately, the Sahel – and Mali, in particular – are 'soft-paved' playgrounds for China's foreign policy in the field of security, which give it sufficient room for manoeuvre to advance its political interests" (Ursu, 2019: 134).

So, while security and, through it, the trade of hard power tools is becoming an increasingly significant factor in China-Sahel relations, it remains negligible compared to economic and diplomatic-political measures.

The limits of China's role in the Sahel thus stems from its own global position and the complexities of the Sahel situation:

“There is a loose correlation between those African countries that are the main beneficiaries of Chinese military cooperation and those that are major suppliers of oil and minerals to China” (Shinn–Eisenman, 2012: 163)

But this correlation is a bit less clear in the region, the strategic geopolitical games (and the presence of many external powers) can be deterrent for China – as it is the case for instance in the Middle East. There is

“France's strategic interest in the region and its overt (and paternalistic) sense of priority of intervention, other European Union actors, U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM), and Russia's involvement, among other players. In light of such a complex picture of a cacophony of foreign interests in the region, Chinese officials have expressed their cautious approach” (Benandullah, 2024).

Finally, China's non-interference principle remains a cornerstone of its foreign policy and is unlikely to be abandoned:

“Unlike former colonial powers, for instance, that have no issue to unilaterally intervene militarily or impose sanctions against African countries, China tends to opt for multilateral institutions and seek the consent from the concerned countries to resolve security issues” (Gazibo–Lema, 2022: 10).

5. Soft power: Image or stability?

5.1. Chinese Soft power in the Sahel

As in the rest of Africa, in the Sahel, China is first of all perceived as a facilitator of economic development. Its image is overall positive. Its soft power derives from its own economic ‘success story’ at home and the recipes it can offer in terms of shortcuts to modernization. In the region as elsewhere in the Global South, China has propagated an anti-colonial, anti-Western narrative that clicks with some of the aspirations of the local societies, and particularly the local elites.

China has been active in promoting its soft power in the Sahel, mainly in opening Confucius Institutes (CIs, also known as ‘Confucius Classrooms’) and offering a larger number of scholarships to local students. Nine out of ten countries of the region have one or several CIs: Burkina Faso, Chad, Gambia, Guinea, Cameroon, Mali, Mauritania, Nigeria and Senegal. Only Niger does not yet have one. Some of the scholarships are awarded to CIs' most assiduous students. Beijing also organizes study tours around China for members of the local political or economic elites that Chinese embassies have identified. While numbers are in the tens for each country, these exchanges contribute to promoting a positive image of China.

Yet, China is not the only country to have a positive image in Africa, the US and to a lesser extent former colonial powers also do. Moreover, perception of both China and the US has gone down in the last few years. In 2019-2021, in a sample of 34 African countries, a majority of respondents estimated that China (63%) and the US (60%) had a positive economic and political influence on the continent. In contrast, only 46% of the respondents thought that the former colonial powers had a positive influence (Afrobarometer, 2021). In 2022, the percentages dropped to 49% for both China and the US. In most Sahel countries, because of its growing footprint and US's disengagement, in 2023 China's positive influence was clearly stronger than the US: 74% against 53% in Cameroon, 69% against 41% in Mali, 54% against 47% in Niger, 51% against 46% in Senegal, 48% against 41% in Nigeria. But in other Sahel countries, the US remains more popular: 63% against 59% in Guinea and 36% against 26% in Gambia (China Global South Project, 2023). In other words, it is a mixed bag and most African societies want good relations with all of their external partners.

5.2. Humanitarian Efforts

China's medical missions are present in all Sahel countries and all together 48 out of 54 African nations. They practice both Chinese traditional medicine and Western medicine. They rotate every two years but have a steady presence, usually attached to a local hospital.

China has been actively involved in the fight against Ebola in 2014-2015 but mainly in Liberia and Sierra Leone (Cabestan, 2020). In Guinea, France was in the driving seat. In contrast, the Covid-19 pandemic gave the occasion to China to promote its own assistance and diplomacy, providing large quantities of masks, personal protection equipment and later vaccines to African and in particular Sahel countries. For that purpose, local Chinese medical missions were mobilized. In 2021, China had already delivered 200 million doses of vaccine and promised to supply another 1 billion doses to Africa, out of which 600 million would ultimately be donated (Reuters, 2021).

But the pandemic has also a negative impact on China's image: many African countries preferred more efficient Western vaccines to Chinese vaccines. And the various forms of discrimination that African nationals faced in China during that period, particularly Nigerians in Guangzhou, put Beijing on the defensive, compelling it to reassure its partners in the Sahel and elsewhere in Africa (Cabestan, 2022).

Conclusion

As for other countries, for China the Sahel has become a more difficult region of Africa to deal with. Despite Russia's appearance, insecurity in Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso has declined. Despite China and other countries' economic cooperation and development assistance, the Sahel has remained one of the poorest regions of

the world, handicapped by desertification, uncontrolled population growth, high unemployment, terrorism and migrations to Europe and elsewhere.

Yet the Sahel is a diverse region: China has been pragmatic and adaptative, developing closer and more fertile partnerships with the countries that are in a better shape and more stable, as Senegal, Mauritania, Gambia, Guinea and Nigeria. With the two latter states, a genuine economic complementarity is taking shape, accompanied by closer political relations.

This is to say that China's role in the Sahel has first and foremost been economic and diplomatic, nurturing close relations, with the help of its public and private companies, with the local governments and elites. Its security role has been secondary, relying mainly on private security firms for protecting its nationals, hence its preference for multilateral solutions. In this regard, however, changes are expected, and Beijing will likely take on a more significant role in the stability and security of the region (and the continent) - this will be required by its own interests and those of its African partners. It is still uncertain to what extent it would continue to prioritize multilateral approaches and how boldly it might reach for unilateral tools.

Finally, it should be kept in mind that many external actors remain present in the Sahel: the former colonizers, as France and Great Britain, the US, the EU but also other emerging states as India or Türkiye. As a result, China is far from being dominant. Its role is growing, its footprint gets deeper, but it will continue to compete – and sometimes cooperate – with many other countries in a region where top priorities have remained development and security.

In the future, the Sahel will remain for China a difficult region to deal with. Poverty, instability, insecurity and terrorism are likely to continue to complicate economic cooperation and the establishment of closer political relations. The slowdown of the BRI is also conducive to somewhat reducing China's footprint in the Sahel. Beijing will probably be keen to remain present and active in all the countries of the region, privileging multilateral solutions to the Sahel's security challenges. Nonetheless, because of the crisis ECOWAS is going through, it is likely to prioritize bilateral approaches over multilateral ones and to deepen its relations in priority with the countries that are both stable and useful suppliers, such as Guinea, or customers of the Chinese economy, such as Nigeria or Senegal. And China's actual influence in and leverage of the Sahel will depend upon other countries' involvement in this region. While the new Trump administration may increase the US' disinterest for Africa, the EU and emerging countries as India and Türkiye will continue to enhance their cooperation and as a result compete with China in this part of the world.

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PART II: GLOBAL AND NATIONAL RELATIONSHIPS WITH THE REGION

CHAPTER 9

Russia and The Sahel

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Abstract

Russia recently became an important factor in the security-military-economic diplomatic world of Africa. The Eastern power began to grow and expand its international relevance in the last decade. One of the main spheres of influence for the country is the Sahel, where a lot of minerals and security opportunities await their diplomatic corps and security forces. In this chapter, the main goals and aims of Russia in this area of the continent are summarized, and the factors of its influence are assessed, along with consideration of the most important activities of the country. Firstly, the historical aspect is analysed, how events have unfolded between the two entities, then the military and economic goals are examined. After that, the role of Russia in Africa is explored, after which the importance of the Russian security politics and along with it, its semi-cooperation with the Wagner Group is assessed. Finally, at the end of the chapter the most important countries in the Sahel are examined according to their relevance to Russia. Altogether, the chapter strives to characterise the Russian diplomacy and security politics in Africa in the past ten years. Not only does it draw conclusions about the main characteristics of the official Russian politics, but it also tries to assess the problematics of the Russian PMCs like Wagner Group and how they affect the continent with their security politics and military operations in the Sahel. Thus, the article thoroughly analyses Russia and the Sahel.

Keywords: *Russia, Sahel, Wagner Group, Africa, security politics*

Introduction

Russia has a long history in Africa. Although it never had colonies in the continent, it always tried to pursue its interest in the region. The Eastern Empire, later the Soviet Union, and finally, the Russian Federation have always paid attention to the continent and made every effort to build diplomatic, political, and economic relations. The first contact was made between the two entities in the 19th century. Still, the actual commercial, financial, and military relationship developed at the height of the Soviet Union in the 20th century, in the 1950s and 60s. The timing was not a coincidence since this was the point when African countries began to be liberated, and many were gaining independence around that time. Of course, it was in the interest of the Soviet Union to find commercial and political allies and make friendships with the African states, as well as disseminate their doctrine of communism, supporting several independence movements across the continent. The Sahel was also an important area for the Russians, but it was not the central area of interest at that time; its time was to come later. When the Cold War was over, in the era of Gorbachev and the first part of Yeltsin's rule, Africa was neglected by the new Russia. It was temporarily forgotten, as the country had to fight with internal problems and had no power to concentrate on more significant foreign interests. The real turning point came with Russian President Vladimir Putin's rise to power in 1999. The new president introduced different politics, as he was willing to open up to Africa. Putin has always had ambitions to restore Russia to its former strength and to make it a decisive power in world politics.

Part of that was the expansion of relations with African countries, including in the Sahel. The connections intensified after the signing of deals by several Russian companies and the opening of embassies and consulates on the continent. A culmination of Russian-African relations was the 2019 Russia-Africa Summit in Sochi, which Russia organized. The negotiations were so successful that a second Russia-Africa summit was organised on 27-28 July 2023 in Saint Petersburg (Second Summit Russia–Africa, 2024). There was even a Ministerial Conference held about the talks on 10 November 2024 (Joint Statement of the First Ministerial Conference, 2024). However, since the years 2015-16, the Russian presence in the Sahel belt took another turn, and the country appeared in the region on a larger scale. This was delivered primarily via the so-called Private Military Companies (PMCs), especially the Wagner Group, which is staffed with veteran soldiers and military experts. Russia's strategy was to increase its military, economic, and diplomatic presence by securing concessions and making deals with African regimes. This way, Russian influence grew consistently alongside the expulsion of the Western forces (French, American, etc.). It remains an interesting question: what will Russia achieve in the Sahel belt, and how will the future turn out in the balance of power game? However, before going into the analysis, it is perhaps of importance to note that this chapter is focused on the

importance of the role of the Russian PMCs, which can be regarded as the 'new' tool of the Russian foreign policy on the African continent and, although they are also of relevance, the economic, cultural and other relations between Russia and the Sahel are not accorded so much emphasis.

Historical Review of the Russian-African Relations

Relations between Russia and African countries goes way back in time. The Russian Empire first interacted with African countries at the end of the 19th century. In 1898, they established a general consulate in Tangiers, Morocco, while diplomatic contacts were formed with Ethiopia and Transvaal. The Russians were also involved in the Second Boer War (1899-1902), where 200 Tsarist officers served against the British (Pham, 2012, pp. 71-72.). There are also signs that Russian soldiers took part in other conflicts of the continent, as – assumedly – there were Russian soldiers in the employment of Negus Menelik, the Emperor of Ethiopia (Shubin, 2013, p.1.). These facts show that the Russian Empire was, at the very least, spreading its wings in the region and finding out about the territories that were not previously known to them.

For the next few decades, there was not much development of the relationship between the two regions until the establishment of the Soviet Union in 1917. Lenin was unimpressed with Africa; nothing happened until the 1920-30s. By that time, Russian communists began to show interest in the Pan-African Movement, and they established relations with some of the African nationalist leaders. The rise of Hitler hindered relations between the Soviet Union and Africa, and Stalin was not interested in developing cooperation either. (Besenyő, 2019, p. 133.).

The Second World War can be considered a turning point in the politics of the Soviet Union towards Africa; isolationist Stalinism lasted only a decade, and at the dawn of the Cold War, the 1950s-1960s brought about the liberalization of the strict monolithic diplomacy. With the rise of Nikita Khrushchev, a new era of international relations was born. This was when the African – including the Sahelian – countries became independent; thus, diplomatic ties could be formed with the Sub-Saharan states. This was paralleled by the creation of the Africa Institute in Moscow on the advice of the Soviet Academy of Sciences in 1959. Another sign of the opening to Africa was the establishment of the Patrice Lumumba University, which was to become a connecting point in educational relations between the Soviet Union and Africa (Matusevich, 2019, pp. 27-28.). This was also when the famous Bandung Conference took place in 1955, which was the starting point for the newly independent African-Asian states to express their beliefs in front of the international community. It is essential to know that from the 1950s on, the politics of the Soviet Union were mainly ideological, as they were keen to disseminate their state doctrine, Marxism or communism amongst sympathetic countries and movements in Africa. Many states saw the Russians as partners because of their anti-colonialism and polite diplomacy.

The Patrice Lumumba University served as well as a diplomatic and educational center, where most African elites studied and later returned to the continent as sympathizers of the Soviet system (Kohnert, 2022, p. 2.). The Soviet Union, however, not only expanded its influence in diplomatic ways, but due to the proximity between the two areas, it also tried to increase its impact on Africa and the Sahel by military and economic means as well (Facon, 2017, p. 3.). The 1970s brought about another wave of involvement of the Soviet Union on the continent: firstly, there was intense trade cooperation with Ivory Coast, Ghana, Nigeria, and Kenya. The Russians were also involved in several conflicts, one of the most significant being the Angolan Civil War, in which the Soviet Union supported the MPLA movement. Besides Russia, Hungary – which was then a part of the Soviet Union – also developed a major interest in the region and besides improving cultural relations, it took part in peacekeeping missions in Africa just before the end of the Cold War (Besenyő, 2019, pp. 58-67).

The Soviets continued to support the MPLA regime in Angola and the Marxist system in Mozambique as well. The relationships extended even to the Horn of Africa, where Somalia was a short-term partner for the Russians besides Ethiopia. Siad Barre, the socialist president, cooperated with them for a time, and they even planned to establish a joint naval port in the country. Still, the Somalians broke the alliance (Matusevich, 2019, pp. 30-32.). Altogether, it can be said that the Soviet Union was interested in maintaining its position in the ensuing Cold War. Thus, it was eager to get involved in proxy wars in Africa including the Sahel belt, with the independence movements proving useful for them in expanding their influence against the U.S. The Soviet Union thus took advantage of every opportunity to improve its relations with the African and Sahelian countries where they could counter the perceived threat posed by the West (Kohnert, 2022, p. 4.).

However, significant changes occurred in the 1980s, particularly after the rise of Mikhail Gorbachev, who introduced a new form of politics that not only changed the diplomacy of the Soviet Union – soon to be Russia – but also changed the international relations of the eastern power. From 1985 on, Gorbachev presented the so-called *perestroika* and *glasnost*, which contributed to the opening of the strict communist politics of the Russians. The Soviet influence in Africa started to falter, and the reforms and new politics that were introduced further reduced the Russian presence on the continent. Thus, by the early 1990s, the influence of Russia in Africa decreased and former relationships were abandoned (Matusevich, 2019, pp. 33-34.).

After the fall of the Soviet Union, Boris Yeltsin came to power, under whom relations with Africa significantly faded. There was a profound anti-African sentiment in the country, and there was an element of racism in the public consciousness. Altogether, the Russian population did not regard African countries as important and

started to neglect them. Several Russian consulates and embassies were shut down, and diplomatic relations were severely impaired by the new politics. The only connection between Africa and Russia in this period was the visit of President Frederick de Klerk from South Africa to Moscow in 1992 (Shubin, 2013, p. 2.).

The turning point came in the second half of Yeltsin's presidency (around 1996) when relationships with Africa slowly warmed. One of the most critical decisions of Yeltsin was to change his foreign minister to Yevgeny M. Primakov, who had a lot of previous relations with Africa. His intelligence background and security connections guaranteed that the cooperation between Russia and Africa (including the Sahel) would improve. From 1997 onwards, the most important African presidents visited Moscow, and communication between Russia and Africa became much more intense (Besenyő, 2019, p. 134.). The actual opening, however, of the politics to Africa and the Sahel belt came with the rise of Vladimir Putin in 1999. Putin's basic goals were to reclaim the once-high glory of Russia and the Soviet Union and increase its economic power all around the globe. In 2001, he met with several heads of state, including Hosni Mubarak (Egypt), Abdelaziz Bouteflika (Algeria), Olusegun Obasanjo (Nigeria) and Meles Zenawi (Ethiopia). Since 2005, Russia has established the office of an ambassador to the African Union. Besides that, the SADC and the ECOWAS were also considered partners to cooperate with; Russia participated in several peacekeeping missions, including Sudan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ivory Coast, Eritrea, Liberia, and even Western Sahara. 2002, the Russia-Africa Business Council was created, followed by the Russia-South Africa Business Forum (2006). The same year, Putin made a journey to South Africa, so the relations between Russia and Africa were strengthened.

Furthermore, Russia was (and still is) very active in the gas and oil business: they concluded agreements between the companies Stroitransgaz, Rosneft, and Soyuzneftegaz and the Algerian Sonatrach, with Libya, and with the Nigerien NNPC (Nigerien National Petroleum Corporation) through Gazprom (Pham, 2010, pp. 74-76.). It can be concluded that the politics of Putin and the new Russia, unlike before, when the Soviet Union aimed to spread its political ideology, Russia is now more inclined to make material concessions and base its diplomatic efforts mainly on economic projects. Its diplomacy also differs from that of Western powers in that it does not want to interfere with the regional politics of the African states. Russia's new diplomacy seems acceptable to many African countries. Of course, military and security interests are not forgotten, and they also contribute to the relations between Russia and Africa. Russian military diplomacy also consists of providing arms and security services in order to receive raw materials and mining concessions. (Besenyő, 2019, pp. 135-136; Bartosiewicz, 2022, p. 48.).

The Politics of Russia in Africa after 2010

There was a turning point in the Russian attitude towards Africa in 2009. Then-president Dmitry Medvedev presented a draft called National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation to 2010. The declaration included several new elements of handling African affairs, which were merely asymmetric. This meant that the Russian Federation not only assessed Africa as an essential place for its economic and military interests, but it further projected that the country should be willing to use other, less than 'clean' methods to assure its longed-for global interests and to receive the long-sought title. For example, they employed telecommunication techniques, linguistic and organizational reserves, and even programming to get information that was secluded for them primarily without using these tools. (Lyammouri & Eddazi, 2020, p. 2.).

Between 2005 and 2010 was the time when a new movement emerged between the developed powers. The so-called 'Second Scramble for Africa' started, when world powers and even lesser entities discovered the African continent for themselves once again. Russia was one of these, with the Federation keen to increase its attention on Africa and to enliven its commercial and military interests and diplomatic relations with the continent. Russia was somewhat slow in discovering Africa for itself. Still, it took only a little time after the others for them to pull themselves together and try to gain influence in the region. The rich resources not exploited and exhausted by the former empires were still there, and they were very inviting for the new world powers like France, the US, and Russia to get them through complex diplomatic efforts. Russia understood that Africa is the new future for the uprising as a global power via economic and commercial commitments that could be concluded through diplomatic relations. The president, Vladimir Putin, wanted to rebuild the once-renowned Russian prestige that had lost after the end of the Cold War. The opportunity presented itself in the form of Africa (Olivier & Suchkov, 2015, pp. 148-149).

There are indications (Lukyanov, 2010) that the second element of Russian geopolitics came after the speech of Putin's presentation in Munich in 2007. In this speech, he dealt with the former Russian politics and admitted that something had to be changed to reverse the former post-Soviet attitude and make Russia successful again. The notion of Eurasia and the yearning after the influence over the former Soviet republics became an essential factor in the thoughts of the Russian president and his circle; thus, from then on, the direction of the diplomacy of the country took a turn, and Africa became a lot more critical as a part of the world where more resources could be exploited.

Russia has other reasons for its interest in Africa and the Sahel. It also finds it necessary to continue its policies from before the end of the Cold War. In the Soviet times, the Eastern Empire actively supported African freedom movements and the spread of the ideology of communism. Times have changed, but the distribution of

Russian propaganda and the spread of economic and diplomatic relations did not cease in the area. Geopolitical rivalries are also essential factors for Russia to claim a place for itself in the continent. The presence of India and China in Africa made it difficult for them to gain a dominant share of the territory. However, with the withdrawal of the US forces from Africa during President Donald Trump's presidency, the region was now better suited to building diplomatic relations for the Russians. They also have advantages in the commercial and economic world on the continent because they respect state sovereignty, despise neo-colonialism, and promote non-interference. Through these, they gain the sympathy of mainly autocratic countries that have an aversion to the democratic and liberal expectations traditionally posed by Western regimes. Russia lacks these preconditions; thus, it can do business and establish relations with these countries more easily (Paczyńska, 2020).

Another important reason for Russia to take part in the African economic and social sphere is that it has become secluded from international business and diplomacy due to the sanctions imposed on it by the European Union and the US because of its involvement from 2014 in the war against Ukraine. This new, somewhat still uncharted continent presents an opportunity for the Russians, on the one hand, to take part in the weapons trade that they were already pursuing in the Soviet times. On the other hand, as mentioned before, it is a good opportunity for the country to increase its reputation as a power to be recognised internationally (Steinberg, 2015; Besenyő, 2019).

There is also a negative response to the Russian expansion of the territory (Karr, 2024). This scientific view considers the Russian involvement in the economic, social, and military spheres of cooperation with Africa as a threat to the Western world, which hinders the interests of the US and the larger European countries like France, England, and Spain. This opinion regards the Russian efforts to thwart Western influence on the continent and to obstruct the development of European-US-African relations. Russia is accused of enforcing its military presence on the continent to exert more impact on the African people in not the most democratic way. According to this view, Russia is weaponizing migrants, using the phenomenon to create a negative ambiance for the European powers, so as to prove their worth in Africa. This is a negative view of the Russian presence on the continent. However, there are signs that the eastern country is trying to exploit the opportunities on the continent.

Another source corresponds with the opinion mentioned above (Melville, 2024). According to the author, Russia aims to exploit the apparent weaknesses of the Western powers and exert more influence on the African countries. According to Melville, China and Russia are exploiting the situation in Africa and using the advantage they gained by exploiting the failed peacekeeping operations conducted by the Western powers and gaining a foothold on the continent at the expense of the

Western states. Melville, however, concludes that the Eastern power-takeover will not instantly solve the problems of Africa and the Sahel. Russia is also in an easier situation than the Europeans and the Americans, since most of the African countries regard them as innocent in the previous exploitation of the continent. Some African countries even declined to support the sanctions raised against Russia for its aggression on Ukraine in 2022 (Besenyő, 2024, pp. 120-121.).

This raises the obvious question: how can Russia have exerted its influence in the Sahel (and Africa as a whole) so intensively over the last 10 years without attracting the adjective 'oppressive'? The answer is difficult to comprehend. However, one term captures it: PMCs. In recent years, these PMCs – especially the most notorious one, the Wagner Group – flooded Africa, mainly the Sahel area of the continent, establishing their presence there. In reality, they are linked to the Kremlin and provide information to the Russian state as well as other resources (Mensah & Aning, 2022, p. 54). However vague the relation between the Wagner Group and the Russian government may seem, there is some data on the exchange they conduct between each other. There are signs that even Sergey Shoygu, the former Minister of Defence for Russia organized the arms support for the PMC. There seems to be a genuine link between the Russian elite and the military organization (Besenyő, Türke & Szénási, 2024, p.15.).

Altogether, it can be seen that the Russian diplomatic and military forces are concentrating on the Sahel in Africa because they find it essential strategically and militarily, and also because they would like to regain their influence over the Western powers and squeeze them out from the continent. As 'The Second Scramble for Africa' continues, all powers vie to gain power in the area, and all in all, Russia looks like it is in a position of advantage, as France and the US are forced to leave the area that was previously their domain. What will happen is for the future to know, but the Russian influence is growing along with that of the Chinese, Turkish and Indians. Russia – instead of the European powers – is also keen to support the military leadership of the Sahelian states like Mali and Burkina Faso, and they provide support for the takeovers that happened in the 2020s in these countries (Sandnes & Carrozza, 2023, p. 18.). Türkiye is also a country that wants to take part in the cooperation with the African countries. As a result, diplomatic, military and economic pacts are concluded in order to enhance the presence of the Eastern power and to further its participation in the diplomatic-security competition on the country (Mustapha, 2024, p. 205.)

To understand better the motives of the Russian Federation to gain a foothold in the Sahel, it is necessary first to take a closer look at the so-called PMCs, most notably the Wagner Group: what its motivations and aims are; why is it has such a large presence in the Sahel; and what would it like to achieve in the area.

The Wagner Group and its Role in the Sahel

To comprehend Russia's – or its PMC's – motivation for entering the Sahel and performing their activities, it is firstly important to outline the situation in the territory, the alleged reasons why these PMCs are deployed in these areas, and why precisely in the Sahel. What are the motivations for getting involved in such a dangerous and adventurous place?

The countries of the Sahel have, since the end of Al-Qaida and the 2012 Mali conflict been plagued by terrorist activity. Countless organizations had a presence in North Africa. For example, the Jama'at Nusrat al-I wa I-M (JNIM), Katiba Macina or the DAESH in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) and Boko Haram all gained footholds in the Sahel area in Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Chad, Mauritania, and Nigeria. There are also signs that the terrorist activity in the Central-Sahel is starting to affect Western Sahel countries like Togo, Benin Cote d'Ivoire and Ghana. These countries, along with Burkina Faso, aware of the threat and created a common peacekeeping force to encounter the dangers concerning terrorism – the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF/AF) (Faulkner, Parens & Plichta, 2023). Western Sahelian countries – Togo , Cote d'Ivoire, Ghana, Senegal – have all experienced an increase in terrorist attacks and a decline in the security situation which can be directly linked to the coup d'états and terrorist groups activity (Raga, Lemma & Keane, 2023, p. 58.) and, while the Central African Republic (CAR) is considered part of the Sahel region: because of the sizeable Russian involvement there, this chapter also includes CAR for research reasons.

The first problems started with the 2012 Mali uprisings, where the radical Salafi organizations accompanied Tuareg rebels and established the Azawad republic in North Mali. However, this was resolved with French support (Operation Serval). Nevertheless, future missions in Mali (Barkhane, Takuba) were not as successful as the first. The consequence was the withdrawal of the French forces from the country in 2022. The U.N. Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) was also recalled in 2023. During the spread of terrorists to neighbouring Burkina Faso, the French were recalled from there as well in 2023. Soon, the so-called Liptako-Gourma zone (Mali-Burkina Faso-Niger) was swarming with terrorists, and the governments looked helpless. As it can be seen, step by step, almost the whole area of the Sahel belt became a target for the radicals, and the weak government forces were unable to prevent them from gaining ground further. It is also important to consider, that there were two coup d'états in 2020 and 2021 in Mali, and due to the growing security crisis, the French eventually even closed operation Barkhane (Krieger, 2022, p. 22-23.). Since the Western forces were – for several reasons – not welcome and primarily rejected in the area, and they were recalled or expelled from these countries, a new free space developed in the Sahel. The Russians (and the

Chinese), who wanted to regain their former prestige even in Africa, were not afraid to fill in these gaps left by the UN, the US, France, and the British. This was the point where the so-called PMCs entered the scene. There are more, but the most important is the Wagner Group, then led by the (late) Yevgeny Prigozhin. The Wagner Group first entered Mali, but it soon spread along the Sahel belt and gained a foothold in the area (Kumar, 2023, pp. 3-6). The Wagner Group wanted to enter Mali via economic and military concessions that would enhance the influence of Russia in the country. Their plan was to provide security cooperation to the Malian government in return for economic benefits and diplomatic gains (Besenyő, Türke & Szénási, 2024, p. 28.).

But what is the essence of the Wagner Group? To understand better the organization, one has to go beyond the 2010s. After the end of the Cold War, the conflicts of Chechnya, South Ossetia, Abkhazia, Transnistria, and so on, a bulk of veteran soldiers and security experts gathered under the umbrella of preliminary secretly state-supported organizations, the predecessors of today's PMCs. Besides these companies, the emerging oligarchs developed private armies, gathering experienced ex-soldiers and security officials. Finally, other PMCs appeared, like Antiterror-Orel or Redut-Antiterror, which were the private armies of important state figures and had connections to the state apparatuses. The Slavonic Corps Limited PMC was one of these, and it served as the base of the later Wagner Group. The Wagner Group and the PMCs played a minor role in these conflicts, but their importance grew considerably after the 2014 Ukrainian invasion (Sukhankin, 2020, pp. 11-12.).

After some years, in 2022, when the Russian - Ukrainian war started, Wagner was not known to the public; It was just a mercenary group. Nevertheless, after their deeds on the front lines of Ukraine, they became more and more known to the Russian public and received international attention. Some of them were transported to the African front to the Sahel, where they gained a reputation for themselves, becoming notorious for their involvement in African conflicts and economic trade. They were at first secretly financed, but after the outbreak of the Ukraine War and their role in Africa, the Russian state semi-openly acknowledged them, and they even provided intelligence information to the Russian state. The Wagner Group – as long as it has existed or still exists now – was believed to be a very nationalist organization compliant with the Russian state bureaucracy. Their leader was the late Yevgeny Prigozhin, who was based in St. Petersburg and had personal ties to President Putin. The Wagner Group has two main aims: to squeeze out Western influence from the Sahel belt and establish a Russian presence there and to conclude commercial and economic businesses and concessions that benefit both the group and the Russian state. This way, the Wagner Group is a helpful organization for the Russian state to achieve its higher goals in the Sahel region, which is still replete with untouched minerals, mines,

and agricultural produce (Mohamedou, 2024, pp. 10-11.). The Wagner Group has already achieved relevance in the area, for example, in Niger there were demonstrations where the Russian flag and Russia itself were hailed, and the French influence was rejected. Thus, the security organisation has already started to make itself known in the territory along with entering the political and military sphere to influence the Sahel belt (Romaniuk & Besenyő 2023). The Russian PMC also vies for political and diplomatic influence on the continent; thus it tries to indirectly realize the goals of the Kremlin and Russian political leadership. They also provide security assistance to the Sahelian governments without questioning their methods concerning human rights and other humanitarian factors (Arshad & Qayyum, 2024, p. 77.).

It is interesting to conclude some basic knowledge about these people, who they are, and their training. First, they are recruited until age 50. They are primarily ex-soldiers, veterans, and elite-trained commandos who most likely have some GRU (Russian Military Intelligence) background. If they are not ex-secret service, they have affiliation with the Russian Military, where most of them received training. The number is uncertain, but the estimates indicate that their largest presence was 10,000 people in Ukraine (Besenyő, Szénási & Türke, 2024, p. 14.).

It can be concluded, then, that the Wagner Group and the other PMCs play a significant part in the influence that Russia has gained in the Sahel in recent years, and their work has been of meaningful use to the Russian government. Their goals are manifold: exert influence for their country – being nationalists – and gaining military and economic advantage for their state and themselves, thus simultaneously acting as mercenaries and patriots. Finally, they can still fight against terrorists, therefore helping the weakened African governments in their efforts to strengthen their countries. What methods they use and how they ensure this security are serious questions; however, their presence is felt, and they are not likely to go away soon. The Western governments thus have to reconsider the situation and find a solution to gain more influence in the region to overtake Russia (or China) in this chess game.

What does Russia do with these PMCs, especially the Wagner Group in the Sahel? How does it try to establish its presence without totally committing itself to the actions of these organizations? In the next sections, each critical country of the Sahel belt will be considered regarding how and at what level the Russian government and its affiliates try to gain a foothold in them.

Russia in Mali

The terrorist threat that spread all over the northern part of Africa began from the Mali uprising, where radical Salafi movements, along with the Tuareg rebels, broke out into revolution in 2012, which the French and Malian governments then suppressed in Operation Serval. This was followed by Operation Barkhane, which was

less successful, as it turned out that it could not solve the problem of the guerrilla warfare of the terrorist organisations. The Malian government was weakened so much that two consecutive coup d'états in 2020 and 2021 ravaged the country further. Thus – with the failure of the counterterrorist operations – the French had no choice but to withdraw from the country in 2022, and the MINUSMA operation was also recalled in 2023. This was the point where the Russians entered the scene. In 2021, the Malian government called them in place of the French, who were exiting the country (Kumar, 2023, p. 11.). It is perhaps important to note that the Malian coups were not without precedent concerning the Russians. Some army officers participating in the Mali coup received training in Russia since they were in the country from January 2020 and had just returned before the putsch took place (Redondo, 2020). The Malian events present an example of how the Russian military entities like the Wagner Group take advantage of a porous security situation. The Wagner Group – and other Russian military groups similar to it – make the area more insecure for the local people. Besides the military cooperation, the Malian government is thus exposed to the uncontrolled activities of Russian security forces (Mehta, 2023, p. 20.). Three important factors were the basis of Russian participation in the Malian situation. Firstly, they supported the Malian government and security forces, providing a private bodyguard to the Malian junta. Besides this, they aimed to supplant the French troops and help the Malian army by enhancing their military and arms techniques. Secondly, they were eager to secure their interests in the region by taking control of some of the essential economic and military infrastructure situated in the country. Third, they also wanted to build up Russian soft power in the country to spread the recently reformed Russian imperial consciousness throughout Africa (Mohamedou, 2024, p. 18.). Russia's strategy is as simple as it is brilliant. They provide security experts, arms, and weapons to the country, while Mali (and other Sahelian countries) give in exchange economic goods and benefits, thus providing a business for the Russian army and mercenaries that is very beneficial not only for the Wagner Group but for the Russian state as well, even if it officially never acknowledged its direct involvement in the Malian conflict. Altogether, it can be said that Russia's participation in the Malian (and other) situations in the Sahel belt supports the theory that it is vague at best. Following this tendency, Russia made several arms deals with the country in the past decade, and it tightened its diplomatic relations with Mali and through business deals it concluded with the Sahelian country (Lyammouri, 2021). Another cause eases the Russian diplomatic and military moves in Mali and the neighbouring countries. The Sahel has had enough of the French and the American counterterrorist operations, which were mostly a failure, and their support programs against terrorists proved to be unsuitable for the situation. The Russians (through the Wagner Group), besides concluding economic, military and diplomatic concessions for guaranteeing security protection for governments, also create vague security situations and are in fact, responsible for the insecurity for a lot

of Malian civilians. As will be discussed later, the Russian military group often uses unconventional means in the country, and its methods are controversial and different from how Western powers intervene in a security situation (Mehta, 2023, p. 21.). The Wagner Group is also performing military and security peacekeeping tasks, and at the same time these mercenaries portray the maltreatment of civilians in missions against radical Salafi organizations, however mostly innocent people are hurt while with filling the security gaps created by inconsiderate government troops and radical/terrorist networks (Edet, Edet & Confidence, 2024, p. 56.).

The desperate Sahelian (Malian and other) people wanted a new solution, and there Russia was, a new force that had no colonial past and which was ready to help without too much caring about human rights and democratic values that were sometimes uncomfortable for autocratic African regimes. Due to this, the Malian government chose Russia to aid them at their campaign against extremist and securing their countries (Mensah & Aning, 2022, p. 55.). The Malian adventure for the Russian mercenaries had a shadowy side as well: there are reports about torture, atrocities against civilians, and other crimes committed by their soldiers. The Malian leadership went as far as to use the Wagner Group to crush opposition protests as well (Le Roux, 2022). Although these horrific actions were not fully proven, it cannot be entirely excluded that the Russian PMCs have a hand in the mishandling of the civilian population in the areas where they work. For example, allegedly in Moura, they killed 203 civilians along with Malian army officers (Besenyő & Sólyomfi, 2024, pp. 162-163). If these horrific crimes happened, then the Russian forces should be blamed for the atrocities they committed.

Russia in Burkina Faso

The events in Burkina Faso are akin to the Malian events. The terrorist nest began to spread to this region earlier, but the real problem started in 2019 when the extreme violence of extremists was released upon the country. It has become impoverished, and between 2018 and 2020, the number of terrorist attacks multiplied (Sidorova & Zherlitsyna, 2022, p. 215.). The extremist network expanded step by step, and these organizations that cause harm to a lot of countries in the Sahel have cast their net over other places as well in the region. In 2018, Burkina Faso also asked for the help of French forces, but, just as in Mali, they failed to provide a secure country for the government. The French presence lasted only until 2023, when, after two consecutive coup d'états in the country, the Burkinabe people had enough of the Western power in Burkina Faso and expelled the French. However, as in Mali, this was not without precedent. The Russian forces were already near the country in the early 2020s. In 2021, they started an unprecedented but very successful disinformation campaign – part of the Russian soft power effort to gain the upper hand in a Sahelian country – to discredit the French forces. Since this campaign was

ongoing, and the African people anyway did not sympathize entirely with the colonization-past troops, they had to leave Burkina Faso. The Russian offering was the same: military protection in exchange for economic and political gain. However, the problem was that even with the presence of Wagner Group in the country, Burkina Faso was not able to provide sufficient defence of the civilian population as the extremist threat expanded, and in 2023, another coup was carried out (Kumar, 2023, pp. 16-20.). The Russian presence became significant in the country at the time of the coup, when the Wagner Group helped soon-to-be-president Ibrahim Traoré to power on 30 September 2022. During the coup, pro-Russian and anti-French demonstrations were held and thus Russian presence was further established (Besenyő, Türke & Szénási, 2024, p. 39-40.). Regarding perceptions of the Russian PMCs and their work in the Sahel and Burkina Faso, some data suggests that Putin, Russia, and his affiliates are regarded a lot less dangerous than Europe or other Western countries: only 1/3 of the population believes they present a significant threat (Vice, 2017, p. 6.). In recent times, the cooperation between Russia and Burkina Faso seems to have expanded. President Putin and the Burkinabe leader, Ibrahim Traore agreed a deal for the building of a nuclear plant in the country. The deal was concluded at the Second Russia-Africa Summit held in St. Petersburg (on 27 and 28 July 2023). The nuclear plant would be a part of the new Burkinabe development plan to expand the country's energy sources and to enlarge Russian - Burkinabe cooperation for the future. The deal is part of the rapprochement between the Central-African countries and Russia, amongst which Burkina Faso stands out. Burkina Faso thus, along with its military and diplomatic cooperation with the Eastern power, is creating an amicable environment with Russia, not an entirely new phenomenon in the Sahel (Aradi, 2023).

Russia in Niger

Niger is similar to Mali and Burkina Faso. It lies in the same region, and the terrorist threat (DAESH and Al-Qaeda) spread to this country fast as well. For international powers Niger has the alluring amount of uranium; thus, France and the US also had vital economic and military interests in the country. The method was the same here: in place of the Western forces, the Wagner Group came and secured a foothold in the territory. It was not a difficult thing to do since, in 2023, there was another coup d'état in Niger as well. Thus, the country was weakened by extremists, instability, and regional circumstances.

Nevertheless, the Russian disinformation campaign was present here, too, and it was so effective that during the putsch, Russian flags were waved while people were demonstrating against the Western presence. The other reason that made Niger so crucial for Russia – besides their yearning for regional and global recognition was the overly present uranium deposits that are very valuable for an international power to exploit. Russia – or the Wagner Group, to be more precise – this way took over the

country from the Western forces and established itself as an arms and security technique provider, and in exchange, it gathered some of the uranium nearby (Aliyev, 2023, pp. 349-352.).

After the declining relevance of the Wagner Group after Prigozhin's departure, another security entity appeared: the so-called Africa Corps. The organization in Niger is built from approximately 100 military experts or security advisors, who are instructed to help the Nigerien junta under President Abdourahamane Tchiani. The Russian military group is seeking economic gains and benefits from the Nigerien government in exchange for security cooperation with the presidential guard. The Africa Corps resembles its predecessor, the Wagner Group: it follows a pattern similar to them by providing security contributions for to the Nigerien leadership and it includes economic (mining, etc.) concessions with them at the same time. The most probable source for this business is uranium and oil which is present abundantly in the country, but there could be other minerals to be extracted in exchange for security assistance. Niger thus became a part of the Russian power extension on the continent and a factor in the security-diplomatic-economic cooperation that the Eastern power is developing in Africa (Faulkner, Parens & Plichta, 2024, p. 26.).

Russia in the Central African Republic

Although the Central African Republic (CAR) is not strictly part of the Sahel, the literature often treats it as part of the region. Thus, this chapter could not afford to leave it out from the most terrorist-affected, Russian-influenced Sahelian countries. The Central African Republic's conflicts stem from the 2013 conflict between the Christian anti-Balaka and the Muslim Séléka groups. When the latter overpowered the Christians, and with the coming of the radical religious exploiters, it could be predicted that the extremist threat would increase in the country. CAR is also rich in minerals, such as gold, diamonds, and other valuable economic factors, which provide fertile ground for conflict. The Russians were thus eager to exploit. In 2018, they developed a presence and, along with some security companies, the Wagner Group also established a base in the country, providing armed assistance to the presidential guard and the army in return for gold and diamonds in concessions (Mohamedou, 2024, pp. 23-24.). The Russian presence in the CAR is – besides the economic benefits – for the establishment of Russian interests in the area and the security entities like Wagner Group are for providing military assistance to the government in order to maintain their power and suppress opposition movements and demonstrations against the regime (Bartosiewicz, 2022, p. 51.). The Russian presence is a sign that the Western forces are fading in the country, and a new entity is exploiting the minerals. To demonstrate how much the Russians are tied into the country's bloodstream, it is perhaps interesting to mention that even the 'Miss Bangui' contest, a beauty contest in the country, was supported by the Russian Embassy (Huon & Ostrovsky, 2018). The

beginning of the Russian influence in the CAR was in 2018, when a military presence in the country was established. In 2022, the Wagner Group boasted a 10,000-person strong contingent that assisted the presidential guard of CAR. The Russian influence in the CAR thus represents the power extension that the Eastern country is building in the Sahel. The Wagner Group – as the semi-legitimate representative of the Russian government – made concessions in gold and diamond-mines with the CAR-government, so that they gain economic and diplomatic support in support of the presidential and security forces in the country. The Wagner Group also participated in the training of CAR military personnel, so in several parts of the country the Russian forces are maintaining a presence, thus they are able to train national military forces and security groups across the country. Nevertheless, the CAR is one of the most important footholds of the Russian security groups, and, along with other military forces, the Wagner Group is present in the country and tries to influence the situation (Besenyő, Türke & Szénási, 2024, p. 34-37.). The Wagner Group also intervened in the security situation in the country, trying to provide assistance for the CAR-government and military forces.

Conclusion

More countries could have been considered regarding the Sahel, some as important as those referenced. Still, due to lack of space – and since the literature regards them to a lesser extent – they must be described on another occasion. Nevertheless, it can be fairly said that after a period of hibernation, the Russian Federation has woken up again, and it is more than eager to assure its global and regional influence in the Sahel and Africa. As has been shown, Russia, via its affiliates, such as the Wagner Group, is ready to embark on a journey on what it has been too soft to do. President Putin's speech in 2007, the new Russian strategy of getting world attention and becoming a global power, is on its way. The Western powers are seemingly on the verge of losing influence in the region, while the Russian semi-military forces and economic and diplomatic relations are increasing and moving forward in the Sahel belt. Suppose the European Union and the US want to keep up with the pace of the newly assertive Russia. In that case, they have to step forward and take measures that will make them more capable of competing with eastern powers like Russia and China. It will not be easy to accomplish, as local support is not with them at the moment, and their methods against the terrorist groups who still present a threat to the local governments who struggle with weak state bureaucracy, are not welcome in the Sahel. However, they might want to counter the Russian gain in the region. In that case, they have to pull themselves together and make efforts to upgrade diplomatic and military relations with the Sahelian countries to become equal partners to the world's other great powers.

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PART II: GLOBAL AND NATIONAL RELATIONSHIPS WITH THE REGION

CHAPTER 10

Türkiye's Growing Footprint in The Sahel

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Abstract

Türkiye's engagement in West Africa, particularly the Sahel, remained limited until recent years when it began to increase its diplomatic, economic, humanitarian and security initiatives in the region, signaling a broader shift in its Africa policy. The last few years saw Türkiye expand its diplomatic network in Sahelian capitals, Turkish contractors embarked on large scale projects and Turkish public institutions intensified their humanitarian efforts in regional countries often in cooperation with Turkish NGOs. Accordingly, Türkiye extended its presence in the regional security landscape amid the deteriorating security conditions. Efforts to overcome the region's multifaceted security challenges, compounded with the recent wave of military coups, have largely failed, creating greater opportunities for Türkiye to step in. This chapter will analyze the factors that underline Türkiye's engagement in the region through three general categories: business ties, soft power tools and defense and security engagements. It argues that Türkiye's multitrack policy in Africa, characterized by collaboration between public entities with non-state actors, is also visible in the Sahel. It is also noted that Türkiye's engagement in the region through the integration of hard and soft power tools (including humanitarian/development aid, flight diplomacy, cultural and religious efforts and educational ties) enables a larger presence and visibility. On the other hand, countries like Senegal and Nigeria receive significant attention from Türkiye, as evidenced by high-level visits, stronger trade ties or large-scale infrastructure projects. However, other Sahel countries such as Niger are likely to receive greater focus, particularly in terms of energy cooperation.

Keywords: Türkiye, Sahel, security, humanitarian engagement, trade, defense, soft power

Introduction

Türkiye's presence in Africa has undergone a rapid expansion, particularly over the past two decades. Türkiye, like many African countries, calls for reform in global governance institutions, particularly the UNSC. This stance is reflected to some extent in their voting cohesion in the UN General Assembly (Eyrice Tepeciklioğlu and Tepeciklioğlu, 2024). Having now the third largest diplomatic network after China and the USA (Neelam and Sato, 2024, p. 10), Türkiye has 44 embassies across the continent (Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs, n.d.). A key aspect of Ankara's strategy has been this robust diplomatic outreach. A recent study highlights how Türkiye's diplomatic network enhances its export performance, with the establishment of a Turkish embassy in an African country boosting exports to that nation by 108% (Tepeciklioğlu et. al., 2024). Over the course of the last twenty years, Türkiye has demonstrated its commitment to Africa through more than fifty high-level visits at both the presidential and prime ministerial levels. Alongside this diplomatic growth, Türkiye and Africa have forged a robust economic partnership, facilitated in part by DEİK (Foreign Economic Relations Board of Türkiye), which oversees the Turkish private sector's international economic relations and operates business councils in 45 African countries. Reflecting the impact of these initiatives, trade volume between Türkiye and African countries increased almost sixfold since 2004 (Turkish Statistical Institute, 2024). Türkiye also established numerous trade deals with African countries including 4 free trade agreements, 34 trade and economic cooperation agreements and 22 bilateral investment treaties.

This diplomatic and commercial outreach is complemented by significant institutional engagement. For instance, Türkiye's official development agency, TİKA (Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency) operates in 22 African countries (TİKA, 2024a: 30-32), Turkish Maarif Foundation (TMF) runs 199 schools in 25 African countries (Türkiye Maarif Vakfı, 2024, p. 223), Turkish Airlines (THY) flies to 58 destinations across the continent (Turkish Airlines, 2024), Yunus Emre Institute has 16 cultural centers in 14 African countries (Yunus Emre Enstitüsü, 2024) and Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı (The Directorate of Religious Affairs) established 12 attaché's offices of religious services in the continent (Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı, 2024, p. 239). As part of its media diplomacy efforts, Türkiye launched TRT Swahili in 2020 and TRT Afrika in 2023. The latter broadcasts in four languages, Swahili, Hausa, English and French. Türkiye's expanding presence across Africa has reached the Sahel region in more recent years. Türkiye's engagement with Sahel countries primarily focused on commercial ties and soft power including development assistance from TİKA, humanitarian aid by Turkish Red Crescent, Türkiye Diyanet Foundation (TDV) and AFAD (Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency) as well as contributions from Turkish NGOs and other public institutions. Educational ties through Turkish

Maarif Foundation, scholarships provided by YTB (Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities) and expanding network of Turkish Airlines' flight destinations further strengthen Türkiye's engagement in the region. However, escalating regional instability and cross-border security challenges prompted Türkiye to deepen its security engagement with the region, positioning itself as an alternative security partner. In addition to its support to enhance local defense capabilities, Türkiye also increased its arms sales to Sahelian countries, with a growing interest in Turkish-made military equipment, particularly drones. This study argues, amongst other things that, countries like Senegal and Nigeria receive significant attention from Türkiye, as evidenced by high-level visits, stronger trade ties or large-scale infrastructure projects. However, other Sahel countries such as Niger, are likely to receive greater focus, particularly in terms of energy cooperation (Milli İstihbarat Akademisi, 2004). This chapter will elaborate on the factors driving Türkiye's involvement in the region with a special focus on three key areas: soft power strategies, business ties and security and defense engagements.

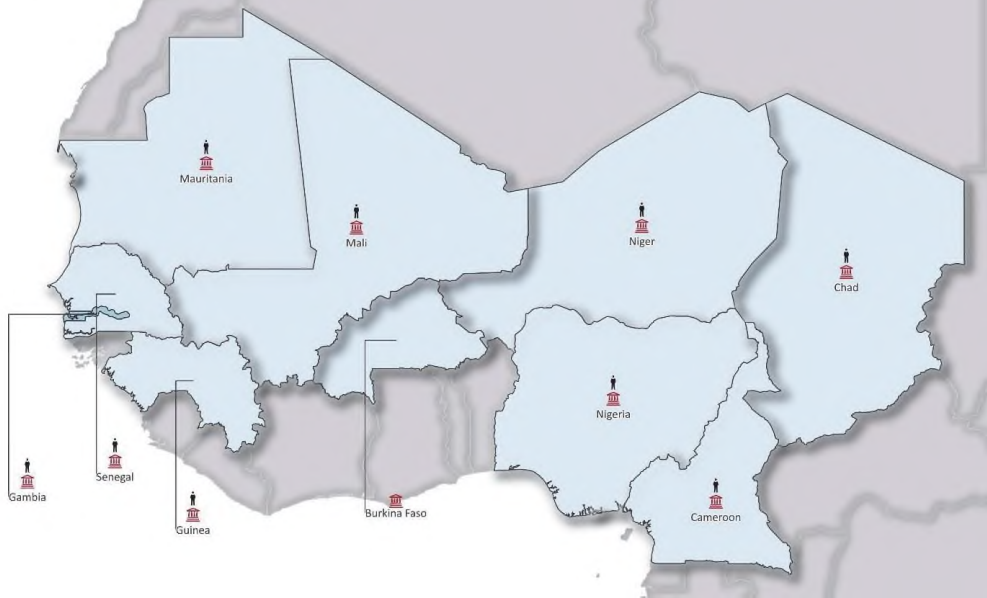
1. Soft Power Engagement

Türkiye maintains cordial, though not deeply intertwined diplomatic relations with Sahelian countries. Having embassies in all Sahelian capitals, Türkiye opened its embassies in Senegal (1960) and Nigeria (1962) relatively earlier when compared with other Sahelian countries. Embassies in other Sahel countries were established between 2010 and 2013. The first high-level visit to a Sahel country was paid by the then President Turgut Özal to Senegal in 1991 (and then in 1993), followed by Prime Minister Necmettin Erbakan's visit to Nigeria in 1996 (İpek, 2014, p. 418). The latter was also one the three countries included in the former President Abdullah Gül's first visit to Africa in 2010. In 2013, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan visited Senegal and Niger under his tenure as prime minister. In 2016, Erdoğan paid a visit to Nigeria as part of his Africa tour this time as the president. It was the same year that Erdoğan visited other Sahelian countries of Senegal and Guinea. Other visits by Erdoğan were paid to Mali and Senegal in 2018, Gambia and Senegal in 2020, Nigeria in 2021 (Hazar & Eyryce Tepeciklioğlu, 2021, pp. 66-67) and Senegal in 2022. As seen, three Turkish heads of state/government visited Nigeria while five visits were paid to Senegal by the president Erdoğan himself. During his last visit to Senegal, Erdoğan penned an article on Turkish-Senegalese relations for AllAfrica website where he noted that "Senegal is unique among African countries."

Türkiye's Political Presence in the Sahel

🏛️ Embassy

👤 High Level Official Visit



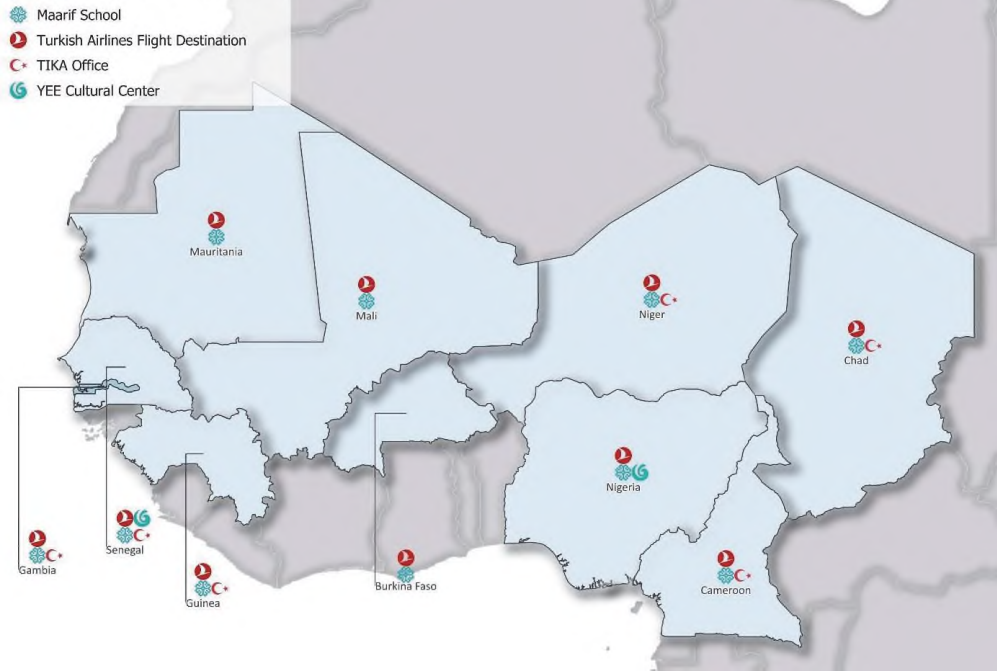
Source: Authors' own compilation. Data abstracted from the webpages of the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Presidency of the Republic of Türkiye.

A key pillar of Türkiye's Africa strategy has been to establish itself as a benevolent humanitarian power. This approach is increasingly pursued through bilateral efforts with a no-strings-attached policy, often in cooperation with Turkish (as well as with local) NGOs. TİKA, responsible for distributing Türkiye's official development assistance (ODA), coordinates its activities through the program coordination offices (PCO). TİKA has PCOs in six Sahel countries while aid activities in other countries are managed through PCOs located in neighboring countries. TİKA's first PCO in the Sahel was established in Senegal in 2007 following the launch of its first PCOs in Africa in Addis Ababa (2005) and Khartoum (2006). PCOs in the Sahel were established respectively in Niger (2013), Cameroon (2014), Chad (2014), Guinea (2016) and Gambia (2017) (TİKA, 2024b). TİKA's projects span various sectors, including infrastructure, transportation, health, education, water and sanitation, agriculture, forestry and fishery while the organization is also involved in training support, humanitarian aid activities and emergency relief. For example, in 2024, TİKA provided fertilizer and seeds to approximately 30 thousand Senegalese farmers to support agricultural production; provided equipment to be used in the evacuation of Senegalese people whose homes and workplaces were damaged during the flood disaster and distributed equipment and medical supplies to strengthen the training capacity of the Health Vocational School in Dakar (TİKA, n.d.).

In addition to TİKA, the Turkish Red Crescent (Türk Kızılay) and AFAD are involved in disaster response, first aid and emergency relief. These two organizations collaborate closely and provide support to government institutions. It appears that, Sudan, Somalia and Chad are among the top priority African countries in terms of their operations. Some of the activities of Kızılay and AFAD in the Sahel include the following: In 2017, AFAD sent humanitarian aid valued at \$150,000 to Chad for refugees from the Central African Republic. This was at a time when Türkiye became the second largest contributor to humanitarian relief, according to the Global Humanitarian Aid Report (AFAD, 2017). During the holy month of Ramadan, 2018, Kızılay distributed food aid to 7,000 families in the cities of Matam and Podor (Senegal), which was on the starvation line (Anadolu Agency, 2018a). In 2022, Kızılay delivered aid to people living in the city of N'Djamena (Chad), affected from the flood disaster (Turkish Red Crescent 2022a, p. 36). In 2021, Kızılay built 14 water wells in Niger, Chad and Senegal with 70,000 people benefiting from this program (Turkish Red Crescent, 2021, pp. 66-67). In 2022, Kızılay constructed 11 water wells in Senegal and Chad and 50,000 people benefited from this program (Turkish Red Crescent, 2022b).

Türkiye Diyanet Foundation, attached to the Presidency of Religious Affairs, is also engaged in diverse projects across the Sahel region. TDV has drilled over 500 water wells in the Sahel, with Burkina Faso, Niger, Chad and Benin emerging as priority countries for these efforts. TDV also builds, repairs and furnishes mosques, masjids and other religious buildings (i.e. in Eyüp Sultan Camii in Mali) in cooperation with TİKA and Diyanet, organizes summits with African leaders and distributes food packages especially in religious months as part of its humanitarian campaigns (Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı, 2019). In addition, TDV donates Qurans in different languages to meet the demand for translated copies across all Sahel countries except the Gambia and Nigeria. Notably, nearly half of the African countries where TDV delivers Qurans are located in the Sahel. TDV also provides scholarships at high-school, undergraduate and graduate levels. While specific data on Sahel countries is unavailable, it has been reported that over 10,000 candidate students from 107 countries applied for Diyanet's scholarship programs for the 2024-2025 academic term, highlighting the program's growing popularity (Diyanet Haber, 2024). Recent data indicates that students from Ethiopia, Egypt, Tanzania and Somalia make up approximately one-third of the recipients of TDV scholarships for the 2023-2024 academic term, totaling 226 out of 734 students. Additionally, students from all Sahel countries benefit from TDV scholarships, with 180 students from these nations are supported in the program (Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı, 2024, p. 232-233).

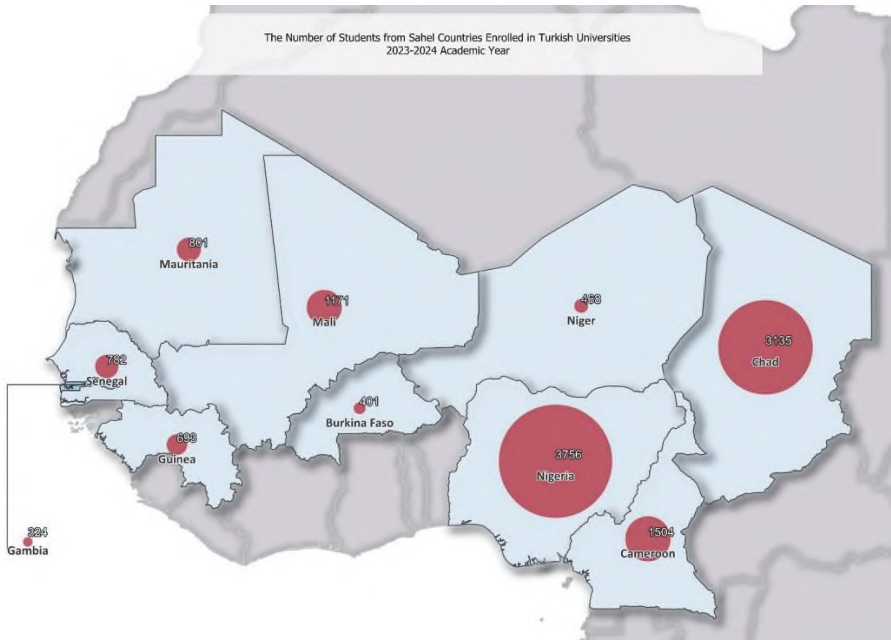
Türkiye's Soft Power in the Sahel



Source: Authors' own compilation. Data abstracted from the webpages of TIKA, TMV, THY and YEE.

Experts note that religion functions as a legitimizing tool in Türkiye's Africa policy and that Türkiye incorporates a religious dimension into its aid efforts as well (i.e. Donelli, 2018; Özkan, 2013; Eyryce Tepeciklioğlu, 2021). Türkiye also leverages religious affinity to advance its interests in the Sahel while religious ties help boost its trade and broader partnerships in region (Lebovich and van Heulelingen, 2023, p. 5). Ankara has strategically sought to engage religious elites while addressing the needs of vulnerable communities. As put by Armstrong (2021): "In Mali, for instance, it built a mosque in an upscale neighborhood of the capital for the High Islamic Council of Mali, the country's most powerful religious association, and rehabilitated another in former President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta's hometown." Here, it should also be noted that religion plays a key role in shaping the activities of the Turkish charities and NGOs operating in the Sahel and elsewhere in Africa (Besenyő, 2021, p. 76). Often targeting Muslim communities with a heavy focus on Muslim solidarity, they also play an active role in complementing Türkiye's humanitarian efforts. For example, IHH (Humanitarian Relief Foundation), one of Türkiye's largest NGOs operating in 123 countries, focuses especially on healthcare services, emergency relief, food aid and water projects. IHH provides water wells in areas where clean water is inaccessible including the Sahel countries of Chad, Guinea, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Cameroon; distributes food packages in religious months to Burkina Faso, Chad, Guinea, Mali, Mauritania and Niger and,

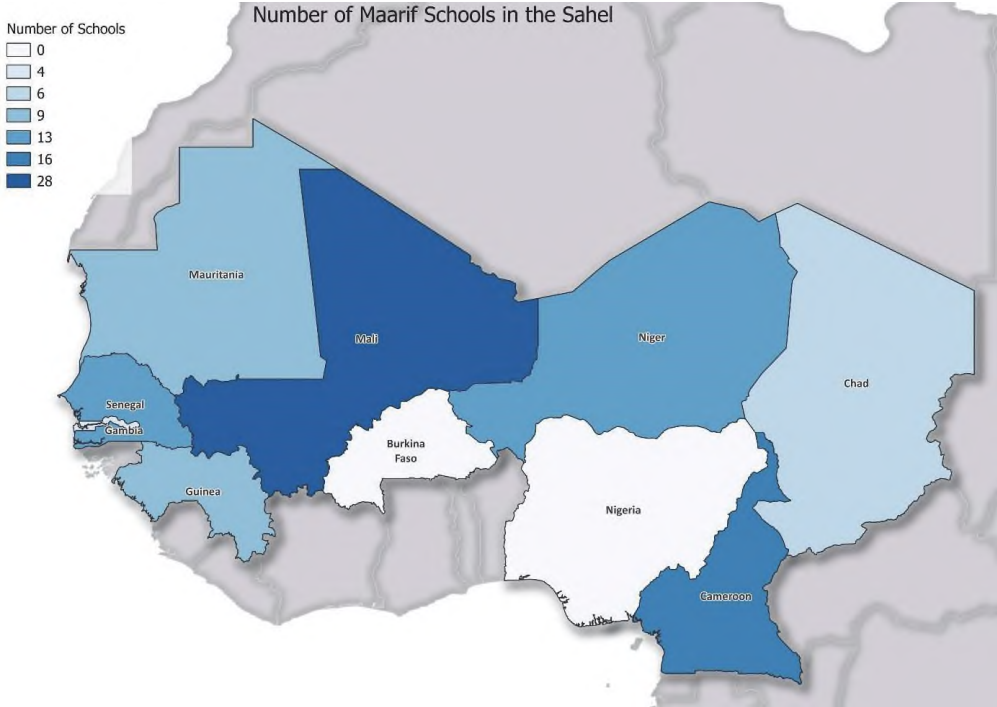
following medical examinations, perform cataract surgeries in the Sahel countries of Nigeria, Chad and Niger (İnsani Yardım Vakfı, n.d.).



Source: Authors' own compilation. Data abstracted from the statistics provided by the Higher Education Council.

Cultural connections and educational opportunities are among the key soft power resources that Türkiye deploys in the region. For example, YTB provides higher education scholarships under its comprehensive 'Türkiye Scholarships' since 2012. Reportedly, 12,600 students from 54 African countries received grants through this scholarship program between 2012 and 2021 while 3,029 students have graduated from Turkish universities as beneficiaries of the program (YTB, 2021). There is a significant surge in the number of applications for this program. For example, Türkiye Scholarships received around 42,000 applications in 2012, the year it was first launched, but by 2024, this number reached 121,830 applications from 170 countries (YTB, n.d.). In addition to those receiving Turkish scholarships, there are also African students who are self-funded. According to the Statistics of the Higher Education Council, 13,035 students from Sahel countries are currently enrolled in Turkish universities while the majority of them are from two countries: Nigeria (3,756) and Chad (3,135) (Yükseköğretim Kurulu, n.d.). Turkish Maarif Foundation further enhances Türkiye's soft power outreach in the Sahel through its network of schools. The TMF operates schools in all Sahel countries except Nigeria and is set to assume the administrative academic management of three new schools in Burkina Faso during

the 2024-2025 academic term (Türkiye Maarif Vakfı, 2024). Nearly half of TMV's schools is located in the Sahel countries. Mali is an interesting case in TMV's activities as the country hosts 28 schools. Ankara believes that graduates of Turkish schools as well as the recipients of Turkish scholarships might help expand cultural exchanges between Türkiye and Sahel countries.



Source: Authors' own compilation. Data abstracted from Türkiye Maarif Vakfı, "Afrika'da Türkiye Maarif Vakfının Faaliyetleri" [Turkish Maarif Foundation's Activities in Africa], Afrika Yıllığı 2023, YTB Yayınları, 2024, pp. 219-229.

Yunus Emre Institute, established to promote Turkish culture, history and language, also plays a crucial role in enhancing Türkiye's cultural interactions with other countries and strengthening people-to-people contacts (Eyrice Tepeciklioğlu, 2023, p. 195). However, out of 16 cultural centers of Yunus Emre Institute, only 2 of them are in Sahelian countries, Senegal and Nigeria. On the other hand, Turkish productions such as 'Muhtesem Yüzyıl' (The Magnificent Century) and Dirilis Ertugrul (Resurrection Ertugrul) are very popular in African countries. *Muslim News Nigeria* (2022) reports that it is the prominent message of Islam, vibrantly displayed that wins the hearts and mind of Nigerians. Offering insights into Islamic cultural traditions and history, those series resonate with viewers and reinforce these values.

Another notable aspect of Türkiye's engagement in the Sahel is increasing flight destinations of the Turkish Airlines (THY), Türkiye's flag carrier airline company. THY flies to all countries in the region. The company's first destinations in Africa have been to Northern African cities of Cairo, Tripoli, Casablanca, Algeria and Tunisia until the mid-2000s. In 2006, Lagos has been the first Sahelian city added to Turkish Airlines' flight destinations. It was followed by Dakar in 2009 and five other Sahelian cities in 2012, namely, Ouagadougou, Douala, Yaounde, Nouakchott and Niamey. THY's latest flight destination to a Sahelian city has been to the Gambia's capital, Banjul in 2018. As of late 2024, Turkish Airlines flies to 14 cities in the region. Turkish Airlines is regarded as a key soft power asset, enhancing Türkiye's growing influence, prestige, visibility and nation branding through its operations across the continent. Successive JDP governments have not only strategically employed Turkish Airlines as a diplomatic tool, but the airline company has consistently carried a political dimension aligned with the broader objectives of Turkish foreign policy (Selçuk, 2021). Türkiye's soft power push has been instrumental in strengthening its trade and investments in the region, making it a notable economic partner.

2. Business Ties

Türkiye's trade ties with African countries increased almost nine-fold following the adoption of the Action Plan for Opening up Africa in 1998. Trade volume with Africa stood at approximately \$31 billion in 2023 while only \$2.5 billion of this trade was with Sahel countries. Among those countries, approximately \$700 million was with Nigeria and \$450 million was with Senegal. This is simply because Türkiye's trade relations with Africa is still concentrated on North African countries. For example, roughly two thirds of Türkiye's trade was with the North African countries of Morocco, Algeria, Libya, Tunisia and Egypt. The latter has consistently remained as Türkiye's largest trade partner in Africa, even after 2013, when relations between the two countries were downgraded to the level of *chargés d'affaires*. This remained unchanged in 2023 with the trade volume between Türkiye and Egypt reaching \$7 billion, accounting for 22 percent of Türkiye's total trade with Africa (TUIK, 2024).

For many years, Nigeria was the only Sahelian country listed among Türkiye's top ten trade partners in Africa, also serving as Türkiye's sole source for natural gas and oil imports (Eyrice Tepeciklioğlu 2017). One there, Turkish business groups assumed large-scale projects in the region, especially in the last decade. For example, Turkish construction company, Summa, built the Abdou Diouf de Diamniado International Conference Center in 2014, Dakar Arena in 2018 and Abdoulaye-Wade football stadium in 2022, all in Diamniadio city, Senegal. The company also constructed a luxury hotel and an exhibition center in the same city (du Couëdic, 2022) as part of its broader involvement in the country's infrastructure development (African Development Bank Group, 2018). In 2017, Summa completed the construction of

Dakar's new Blaise Diagne International Airport together with Limak, Türkiye's second largest international contractor. Those two companies will jointly operate the airport for a period of 25 years, after which full ownership will be transferred to the Senegalese state (Daily Sabah, 2017). Summa also renovated and modernized the Diori Hamani International Airport of Niamey, Niger in 2019 (Embassy of Niger in Copenhagen, n.d.). In 2016, Yapı Merkezi, another prominent Turkish construction company, was awarded the contract to construct a railway project which connects Dakar with Diamniadio in partnership with French Eiffage Company and Senegalese company, CSE. This is the longest section of the railway project, developed as part of a social and economic development plan launched by the Senegalese government in 2014. The company reportedly employs 2,000 people in Dakar, nearly 1,500 of whom are local workers (Doğru, 2019).

Turkish energy company, Karpowership, is also active in three Sahel countries providing energy through its floating power plants, or powerships. In 2018, Karpowership concluded a deal with Gambia's National Water and Electricity Supply Company Ltd. to supply electricity. Supplying 40 percent of Gambia's total electricity demand, the company claims to have boosted the country's access to electricity from 56 percent to 65 percent. The following year, Karpowership signed separate contracts with Guinea and Senegal. Under the agreement signed with Guinea's national electricity company, Karpowership supplied 10 percent of Guinea's electricity need from 2019 to 2023. Karpowership has been supplying 20 percent of Senegal's total electricity demand under a contract with Senegal Electricity Authority, SENELEC (Karpowership, n.d). In 2017, Kazancı Holding's Aksa Energy, constructed a powerplant in Mali under an agreement signed with the Malian government. Aksa Energy first entered the African market in 2015, launching its energy operations with a power plant in Ghana (Aksa Enerji, n.d.). The power plant in Mali started operations with an installed capacity of 40MW but the company later announced that the plant's total installed capacity reached 60 MW in 2021 (Aksa Enerji, 2021).

Turkish companies enjoy a strong reputation for their efficiency, quality and speed in project execution. For example, Abdou Paye Deing, director of Senegalese Business and Finance Association praised Turkish company Summa, for completing the Dakar Conference Center in 2014, well ahead of schedule, allowing the country to host the Francophone Summit. Deing also argued that the solid relationship between Senegalese President Mack Sall and Turkish President R.T. Erdoğan is evident in the growing cooperation between the two countries (Tih, 2017). During the inauguration of the renovated Diori Hamani International Airport in Niamey, the then Niger President Mahamadou Issoufou also expressed satisfaction, highlighting that the airport would position Niamey as a regional hub for air transport and congratulated the Turkish

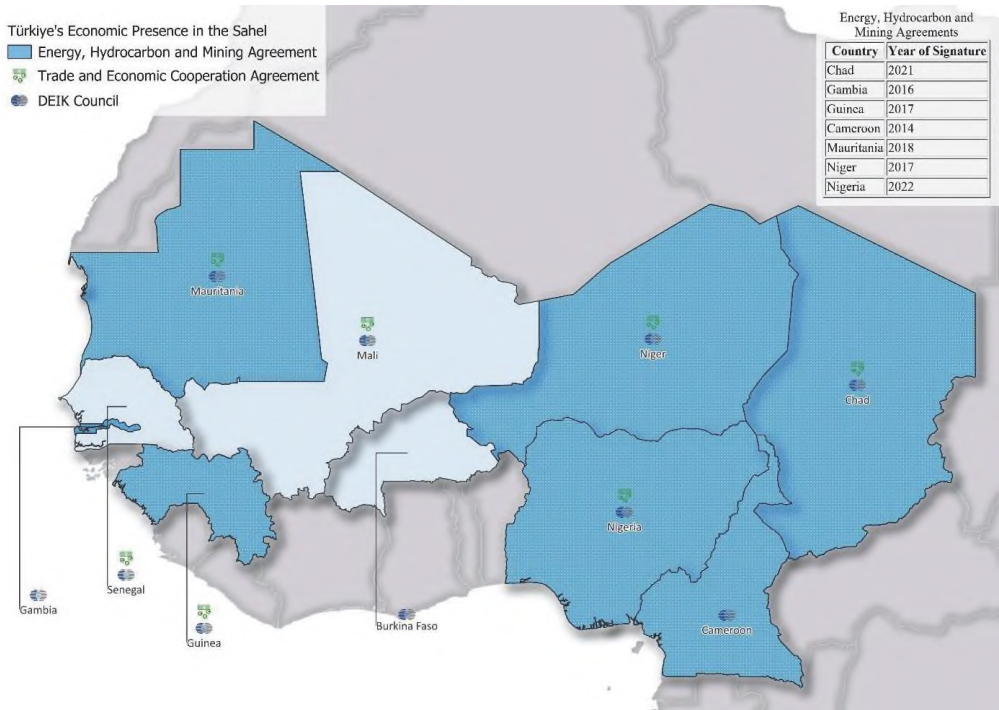
company, Summa, for their performance and for successfully fulfilling their contract with the government of Niger (Embassy of Niger in Copenhagen, n.d.).

Türkiye's growing energy demands have also driven its efforts to diversify its energy sources, including those from African and Sahel countries, particularly as it seeks to reduce dependency on a few suppliers. Türkiye is a major importer of natural gas, relying heavily on external sources to meet its domestic energy needs. According to the latest data, Russia is Türkiye's largest supplier of natural gas, with a 42.27% share of imports. Azerbaijan follows with 20.32%, while Algeria contributes 11.86% and Iran 10.71%. Egypt and Mozambique also emerged as new partners for Türkiye in the energy sector (Anadolu Agency, 2024a). For many years, Iran continued to hold the top position as the largest exporter of crude oil to Türkiye. However, U.S. sanctions on Iranian oil in 2018 forced Ankara to seek alternative sources of crude oil, especially from Baghdad. According to 2022 data, Türkiye imports crude petroleum primarily from Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan and Nigeria (Anadolu Agency, 2018b; OEC, 2002; Siccardi, 2024: 9). While Türkiye has been making strides in various sectors across Africa, its investments in the energy and mining sectors remained relatively limited until the last decade. As noted, Nigeria stood as Türkiye's only African partner for oil and natural gas imports for many years. Now Türkiye has cooperation agreements on energy or hydrocarbons with Chad, Gambia, Guinea, Cameroon, Mauritania, Niger and Nigeria and MoUs (Memorandum of Understanding) with Niger and Senegal.

In July 2024, Turkish Minister of Foreign Affairs, Hakan Fidan, paid an official visit to Niger, accompanied by several high-ranking officials, including Minister of National Defense, Yaşar Güler, Minister of Energy and Natural Resources, Alparslan Bayraktar, Director of MIT (National Intelligence Organization), İbrahim Kalın, Secretary of Defense Industries, Haluk Görgün and Deputy Minister of Trade, Özgür Volkan Açar (Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2024). The visit came two months after Niger's Prime Minister Ali Mahaman Lamine Zeine's visit to Ankara and was concluded with several agreements on energy, mining, intelligence and defense. The two countries will cooperate on exploring and mining mineral resources under the MoU on cooperation in mining. The agreement is expected to encourage Turkish companies to invest in the oil and natural gas fields of this mineral-rich country. As known, Niger is also rich in uranium ores and one the world's biggest producers of uranium. But according to a Turkish diplomat, Türkiye is not looking to source uranium from the country because its first nuclear power plant is being constructed by Russia's Rosatom (Anadolu Agency, 2024b; Reuters, 2024).

Shortly after Türkiye's Oruç Reis Research Ship began seismic exploration off the coast of Somalia in October 2024, a "Memorandum of Understanding on Energy and Hydrocarbons" was signed with Senegal. The MoU was concluded during the official visit of Senegalese President Bassirou Diomaye Diakharr Faye's to Ankara at

the invitation of Turkish President Erdoğan. According to the Turkish Minister of Energy and Natural Resources, Alparslan Bayraktar, the two countries will collaborate in the exploration, production and trade of oil and natural gas while cooperation will soon expand to renewable energy and critical minerals. Türkiye will also engage in seismic exploration activities in both onshore and offshore areas in Senegal (Ministry of Energy and Natural Resources, 2024).



Source: Authors' own compilation. Data abstracted from Resmi Gazete, [the Official Gazette], webpages of the Ministry of Trade and DEIK.

In addition to such deals on energy cooperation, Türkiye established various other economic cooperation agreements with Sahel countries. The first trade and economic cooperation agreement (TECA) was signed with Nigeria in 1986, also one of the first such agreements signed with an African country. It was followed by the TECAs concluded with Senegal (1992), Guinea (1997), Chad (1999), Mauritania (2005) and Niger (2013). In addition to those agreements, Türkiye's Foreign Economic Relations Board has business countries in all Sahel countries. DEIK's first business council in the region was established in Gambia, Nigeria and Mauritania in 2011, followed by the business councils respectively in Cameroon (2014), Chad (2015), Mali (2015), Niger (2015), Senegal (2015), Guinea (2016), and Burkina Faso (2018).

3. Security Cooperation

Türkiye's defense industry has enhanced its production capabilities in recent years, evolving from a reliance on arms imports to the development of its own military technology (Besenyő and Málnácssy, 2022). In line with this growth, Türkiye became 11th among the 25 largest exporters of major arms (SIPRI, 2024, p. 2) and its defense exports reportedly reached \$5.5 billion in 2023 (Pinto, 2024). In Türkiye's search for new markets for its defense equipment, Africa emerged as a promising region (Besenyő, 2021). Meanwhile, several African nations have shown strong interest in Türkiye's defense products, such as small arms, helicopters, armored vehicles, mine clearance vehicles and particularly, UAVs (unmanned aerial vehicles) or UCAVs (unmanned combat aerial vehicles).

Türkiye is not a traditional exporter to African countries and for many years, held only a modest percentage of the share of African arms market. Yet, the trend is steadily changing. From 2019-2023, Türkiye emerged as the fourth largest arms supplier to Sub-Saharan Africa, capturing a 6.3 per cent market share. This growth was largely driven by exports of UAVs to various countries and the delivery of combat helicopters to Nigeria (SIPRI, 2024, p. 8). Nigeria also acquired armored vehicles and UAVs and UCAVs from Türkiye. Mali, Burkina Faso and Chad are other Sahelian countries that received UAVs or UCAVs while Niger is reportedly looking to enhance its military capabilities with the order of five Turkish-made Lentatek KARAYEL-SU drones (Lionel, 2024). When Burkina Faso received two Akinci model drones and three TB2 model drones in April 2024, the military leadership defined it as a "matter of pride." Captain Ibrahim Traoré, head of junta, emphasized that the "TB2" has proven itself since the start of the conflict, while Akıncı has "exceeded the technical capabilities expected by the manufacturer". He further noted that expanding their fleet would enable swift intervention and support continuous surveillance (Nova News, 2024).

Three major factors may explain why African countries, including those in the Sahel, are increasingly interested in acquiring Turkish weaponry, especially drones. The first relates to their cost effectiveness, competitiveness and accessibility. Türkiye sells advanced technology products at an affordable price. For example, American PREDATOR drones are priced at approximately \$20 million per unit and Israeli HERON costs around \$10 million per unit while Bayraktar TB-2 (Tactical Block 2), in high demand in African markets, costs on average between \$1 million to \$2 million per unit (Donelli, 2022, p. 4). Second, the growing demand for Turkish drones can be attributed to their success in different conflict zones including Libya, Nagorno-Karabakh and Ukraine. Third, Türkiye does not tie weapon sales to conditions or certain political commitments unlike many other countries, thus distinguishing itself from those that often use defense ties to shape diplomatic relations. In addition to these factors, Türkiye's involvement in Africa's arms market helps African countries to

diversify their suppliers and thus reduce their over-reliance on a few countries. Only a handful of countries dominate Africa's arms market, and Türkiye's entry provides more options. On the other hand, the use of drones is particularly effective in combating terrorism and insurgencies, a key advantage given that many conflicts in Africa are intra-state. This is particularly relevant for Sahel countries, which struggle a range of security challenges.

Country	Military Equipment excluding UAVs and UCAVs	UAVs/UCAVs
Burkina Faso	4 Nurol Makina Edjer 6×6 armoured fighting vehicle	2 Bayraktar AKINCI UAVs, 3 Bayraktar TB2 UAVs
Chad	3 Hürkus-C attack aircraft, 20 Nurol Makina EjderVs Yalçın 4×4, and Yörük 4×4 armored vehicle.	2 ANKA-S UAVs, AKSUNGUR UAV
Mali		9 Bayraktar TB2 UCAVs
Mauritania	12 Otokar's COBRA 4x4 tactical wheeled armored vehicles	
Niger	2 Hürkus-C light trainer and combat aircraft	
Nigeria	13 Nurol YÖRÜK 4×4 tactical wheeled armoured vehicles, 1 DEARSAN Tuzla class patrol boat, TAI T-129 ATAK attack helicopters	STM TOGAN UAV, 6 Bayraktar TB2 UCAVs, Havelsan Sub-Cloud BAHA UAVs
Senegal	Katmerciler HIZIR II armored vehicles, 25 4x4 armored vehicles called Ejder Yalcin, 4 riot control vehicles called Ejder TOMA	

Table 1: Türkiye's Defense Exports to Sahel Countries

Source: Data abstracted by the authors from the following websites of Defense News, Defense Türk, Military Africa, Times Aerospace and United Nations Register of Conventional Arms (UNROCA)

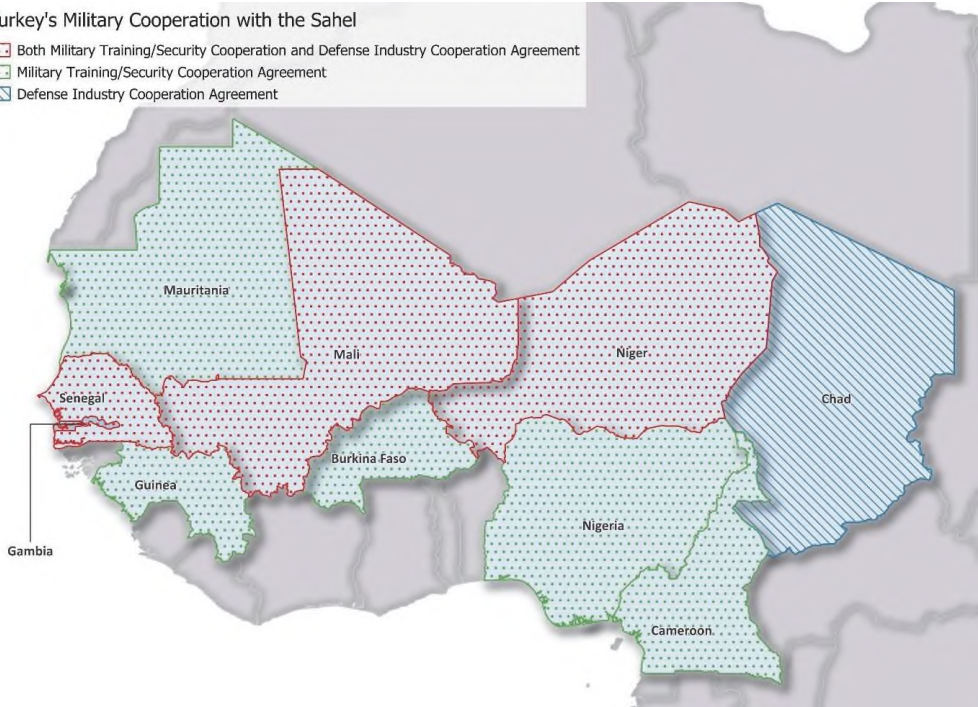
The Sahel region is characterized by increasing instability, marked by attacks from terrorist groups, affiliated by al-Qaeda, DAESH and others, an epidemic of coup d'états, armed conflicts, violent extremism and other cross-border security challenges. As the Western countries and Western-led missions withdraw from the region at the

request of regional governments, driven by rising anti-French sentiments, there are growing concerns that the terrorist groups or Russian mercenaries may end up filling the power vacuum. Experts thus assume a larger role for other external players such as Russia and Türkiye, particularly in the military domain.

Türkiye's security cooperation in the region includes its contributions to two United Nations peacekeeping missions deployed in the Sahel, MINUSMA (United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali) and MINURCAT (United Nations Mission in the Central African Republic and Chad). However, Türkiye's contributions to those missions have been relatively small when compared to those of other countries. Türkiye also pledged \$5 million for the (now dysfunctional) G5 in 2018 to support its counter terrorism initiatives (Daily Sabah, 2018). Türkiye has military/security cooperation or defense industry agreements with all Sahel countries. The details of these agreements differ, with offerings ranging from military training to technical assistance.

Turkey's Military Cooperation with the Sahel

- Both Military Training/Security Cooperation and Defense Industry Cooperation Agreement
- Military Training/Security Cooperation Agreement
- Defense Industry Cooperation Agreement



Source: Authors' own compilation. Data abstracted from Resmi Gazete [Official Gazette]

Here, Gambia stands as an exceptional case regarding the extent of Türkiye's military cooperation in the region. Türkiye's military cooperation with this small African country began in late 1980s, at the request of the Gambian government, following the establishment of its army. By 2019, a total of 7,500 Gambian soldiers had been trained by Turkish military experts, with Türkiye also providing military equipment and

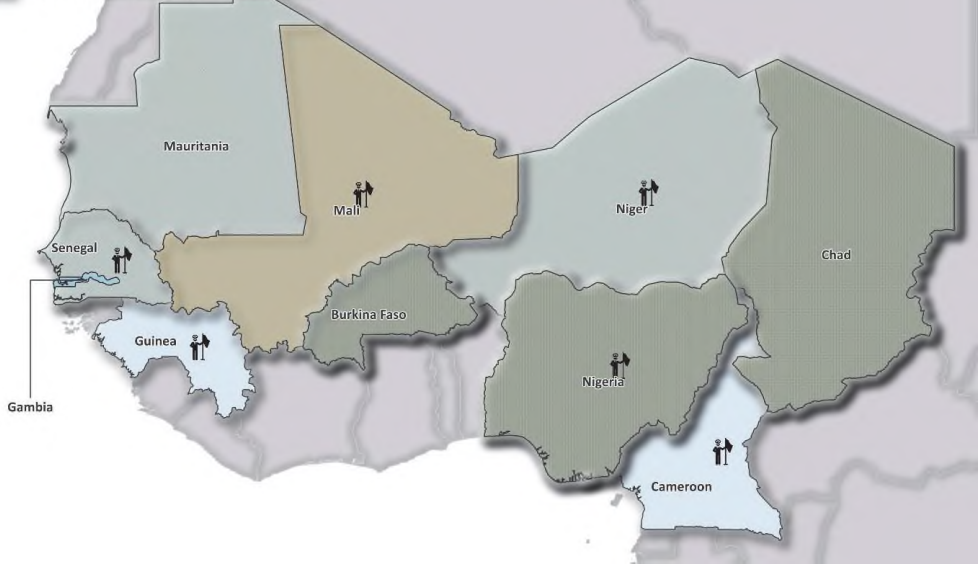
logistical support to the Gambian army, gendarmerie and police force (Alam, 2019). Cooperation between the two countries continues, with Türkiye training 351 Gambian soldiers in Banjul, in April 2024 (Abu-bashal, 2024).

However, it was Türkiye's recent agreements and MoUs signed with Niger and Senegal that sparked significant interest. Experts even noted that the military cooperation deal with Niger would pave the way for Ankara to establish a military base in the country that could potentially enhance its presence in Libya. It is because the ongoing civil war in Libya compels Türkiye to shift its soft power towards a more security-focused influence, with West Africa playing a crucial role in this strategy (Özkan, 2024; Özkan & Kanté, 2022). Türkiye also has military attachés in seven Sahel countries, namely, Nigeria, Mali, Senegal, Cameroon, Guinea and Niger while Gambia, Chad and Mauritania are covered by military attachés accredited to other countries. Playing a crucial role in Türkiye's security efforts abroad, military attachés also provide expertise and advice on matters related to defense and military cooperation and hence help foster closer military ties between Türkiye and other nations.

Recent reports suggest that Türkiye may be expanding its military footprint in the Sahel beyond existing cooperation agreements. According to some sources (Al Mayadeen, 2025) Türkiye has deployed military advisors and stationed drones at the Faya-Largeau Base in Chad, a strategically significant location near the Libyan border. While no official confirmation has been made, such a development would align with Türkiye's broader security and defense strategy in the region. Given the persistent instability in the Sahel and Türkiye's increasing defense ties with Chad, this potential military presence could mark a deeper engagement in regional security dynamics.

Türkiye's Defence Exports to the Sahel

-  Military Attache
-  Military Equipment Including UAVs/UCAVs
-  UAVs/UCAVs
-  Military Equipment excluding UAVs and UCAVs



Source: Authors' own compilation. Data abstracted from the website of the Turkish Ministry of Defense and following websites: Defense News, Defense Türk, Military Africa, Times Aerospace and United Nations Register of Conventional Arms (UNROCA)

Türkiye's engagement in the Sahel mirrors the key features of its broader Africa policy, beginning with humanitarian initiatives and commercial partnerships, extending to security cooperation. Although Türkiye's involvement in the security domain came at a relatively late period, it quickly established itself as a key security partner for Sahelian countries in their efforts to diversify their security relationships. At the same time, Türkiye's pursuit of new markets for its defense products aligns well with the aspirations of African nations to tap into Türkiye's expertise in defense industry and counterterrorism. Türkiye is taking a larger role in resolving African conflicts. Its recent mediation efforts between Ethiopia and Somalia serve as a reflection of this growing ambition. However, Türkiye has long avoided in getting entangled in these conflicts, strongly emphasizing the sovereignty of African countries. For example, despite the strong concerns expressed by Turkish officials over the Niger coup in 2023, Türkiye opposed an ECOWAS (Economic Community of West African States) intervention in the region. President Erdoğan stated that this could lead to the spread of instability to neighboring countries, while also emphasizing his support for a return to constitutional order (Soylu, 2023).

Conclusion

Since the mid-2000s, Türkiye has been following an assertive Africa strategy based on the skilful use of soft power initiatives. This came at a time when Turkish companies were exploring new export opportunities for their global expansion. It was this soft power push that allowed Turkish companies to secure lucrative contracts and expand into other opportunities in African markets, which was later followed by Türkiye's growing security footprint in the continent.

However, for many years, the Sahel remained a distant region for Türkiye, with its involvement there being relatively limited when compared to the more established presence of other countries. Elsewhere in Africa, Türkiye took on more active humanitarian initiatives, Turkish companies undertook numerous projects and Türkiye either initiated or offered to mediate between conflicting parties. This began to change as Türkiye emerged as a reliable partner for most of the Sahelian countries across various domains.

It would be fair to say that Türkiye maintains good relations with all Sahel countries. Türkiye's enhanced presence, particularly in the security domain, now attracts increasing attention. This is especially linked to its increasing defense exports to the countries in the region. Although Türkiye has emerged as a new competitor in the defense sector, its military equipment, especially drones, is relatively affordable and has demonstrated strong performance on the battlefield. Türkiye offers this weaponry with 'no strings attached' and enables partnership diversification for Sahel countries. Although Türkiye often acts bilaterally in its interactions with Sahelian countries; cooperation is possible with other donors including the European Union and the USA especially in the security domain. However, it is crucial for all external actors to set aside their differences in order to ensure regional security and stability.

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PART II: GLOBAL AND NATIONAL RELATIONSHIPS WITH THE REGION

CHAPTER 11

Iran in the Sahel: Strategic Calculations and Geopolitical Maneuvers in The Shadows

Abstract

This study aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of Iran's policies in the Sahel and explore the motivations behind its involvement in the region, the nature of its activities and their implications for regional security dynamics. Given its shifting geopolitical goals and strategic ambitions, Iran has become more interested in the Sahel in recent years. The study argues that Iran's policies in the Sahel are driven by strategic objectives such as the pursuit of political influence, economic interests, and soft power projections with ideological objectives. Iran strives to establish bilateral and multilateral relations with Sahel countries by using its diplomatic networks and alliances to expand its influence in the region. However, Iran's growing interest in the Sahel raises concerns among regional and international powers, particularly regarding its support for non-state actors and its potential to exacerbate existing security challenges. The study will analyze the political, economic, and ideological aspects of Iran's policy towards the Sahel in a multifaceted manner.

Keywords: Iran, Sahel, security, soft power, ideology.

Introduction

The Sahel and Horn of Africa have become crucial components of Tehran's geopolitical calculations. Although Iran's presence in Africa has a long-standing history, its entry into the new wave of regional competition positions it as a latecomer. Despite this, Tehran holds ambitions that surpass its actual capabilities and resources. Consequently, Iran's efforts in Africa have only yielded partial success. It is evident that Africa's significance for Tehran is not due to its intrinsic value but because it serves as a strategic arena where Iran can weaken the positions of its geopolitical rivals within a matrix of competition and interests.

In addition to the fluctuation of Iran's interest in Africa, the Islamic Republic faces serious limitations in attracting African communities. Iran lacks the necessary financial resources and can only invest significantly smaller sums compared to its competitors. As a result, the initiatives of Gulf Arab countries can easily overshadow

Iran's efforts. Moreover, Iran's soft power capacity reveals substantial weaknesses. Neither being "Iranian" nor the identity of Shiism carries substantial appeal or influence in Africa. While there are some Shiite communities with which Iran can collaborate, there are virtually no Iranian communities present in Africa. Furthermore, while many individuals of African descent have migrated and settled in various parts of the world, and their descendants still reside there, the number of Africans living or working in Iran is exceedingly small (Marsai and Rozsa, 2023).

Despite its political and economic constraints, Iran's most effective instrument in Africa is its ideological discourse. Iran's influence on the African continent is predominantly shaped by its revolutionary ideology and its foreign policy strategy built around the "Axis of Resistance" (Karaoğlu, 2022). The alternative revolutionary message and the universal anti-imperialist rhetoric introduced by the Iranian Revolution resonate in various regions of Africa, especially due to the oppressor-oppressed dichotomy embedded within this narrative. When Ayatollah Khomeini presented the export of the revolution, he framed the message of the Islamic Revolution as one that extended beyond Shiite communities, addressing Muslim communities at large. According to Marsai and Rozsa (2023), this discourse can be interpreted in three distinct ways, each with the potential to attract different audiences. However, this potential is often overlooked. These interpretations include (1) the system of *wilayat-al faqih*, which represents the Shiite nature of the new regime; (2) revolutionary activism symbolized by the martyrdom of Hussein, the son of Ali, during the Battle of Karbala; and (3) the concept of Third-Worldism, which portrays Iran as a third-way alternative to the ideological camps of the United States and the Soviet Union, thereby creating opportunities for closer ties with Africa. In line with the pragmatism that characterizes the Islamic Republic's approach, Iran establishes connections with African state and non-state actors at various levels. This allows Iran to engage with different stakeholders and actors depending on their specific contexts and interests. By doing so, Iran seeks to capture their attention and sympathy using flexible approaches and tailored strategies.

This study argues that Iran's policies in the Sahel are driven by a combination of ideological goals and strategic objectives, including political influence, economic interests, and soft power projection. Iran aims to expand its influence in the region by using its diplomatic networks and alliances to establish both bilateral and multilateral relations with Sahelian countries. However, Iran's growing interest in the Sahel has raised concerns among regional and international powers. This concern is primarily linked to Iran's support for non-state actors, which is seen as having the potential to exacerbate existing security challenges in the region.

This study aims to offer a comprehensive analysis of Iran's policy toward the Sahel by examining its political, economic, and ideological dimensions. The analysis

is structured into three sections. The first section addresses the shifts in Iran's foreign policy following the 1979 Islamic Revolution, focusing on the core motivations that shaped the new regime's foreign policy. The second section traces the evolution of Iran's growing interest in the Sahel, providing a historical context for its engagement in the region. The last section examines Iran's religious, political, ideological, military, and economic activities in the Sahel.

Iranian Foreign Policy After the Revolution in 1979

The 1979 Iranian Revolution marked the beginning of a transformation that fundamentally altered not only Iran's domestic politics but also its foreign policy. While the Shah's era before the revolution was characterized by a pragmatic foreign policy oriented towards the West, the post-revolution period witnessed a shift towards a foreign policy framework dominated by ideological elements. Central to this transformation were the concepts of *wilayat al-faqih* and the principle of supporting the "oppressed" against "oppressors," both of which became integral components of Iran's foreign policy doctrine. Following the 1979 revolution, the Islamic Republic of Iran was established on ideological foundations, with its policies and institutions shaped by these principles. The key transformations in Iran's foreign policy after the revolution were triggered by the regime change and the adoption of the *wilayat al-faqih* doctrine. In post-revolution Iran, the influence of the Supreme Leader on foreign policy decisions became significantly more pronounced. This development led to the prioritization of ideological objectives alongside pragmatic interests in foreign policy. The principle of supporting the oppressed against oppressors has been instrumental in legitimizing Iran's support for groups such as Palestinian groups, Hezbollah, and various Shiite factions (Osiewicz, 2021). Another central axis of Iran's post-revolutionary foreign policy has been its enduring opposition to the United States, which it labeled as the "Great Satan." This stance has become a defining feature of Iran's foreign policy orientation (Murray, 2010). The policy of persistent opposition to the U.S. not only reflects Iran's resistance to Western influence but also necessitated the search for new allies on the international stage. These elements collectively explain the continuity of Iran's hardline stance towards the United States and Israel. Revenues from oil and natural gas have expanded Iran's maneuvering capacity in foreign policy, while sanctions have acted as a constraining force on its strategic options (Juneau, 2015). Iran's geographical position, particularly its control over the Strait of Hormuz, provides it with a significant strategic advantage. This control has been leveraged as a critical bargaining chip in both regional and international negotiations.

The Iranian Constitution, revised after the Revolution, embodies a worldview based on the dichotomy between the *mustadafun* (oppressed) and the *mustakbirun* (oppressors). According to this perspective, Iran claims to stand alongside the oppressed of the world against oppressors. This principle is explicitly emphasized in

several parts of the Constitution. For instance, Article 154 of the Iranian Constitution (2021) declares:

The Islamic Republic of Iran considers human happiness in the entirety of human society as its ideal and recognizes independence, freedom and the rule of truth and justice as the right of all people of the world. Therefore, while completely refraining from all forms of interference in the internal affairs of other nations, it supports the struggles of the oppressed against the oppressors all over the world in pursuit of their rights.

Through this provision, the Iranian regime constitutionally asserts its commitment to support the oppressed against oppressors, regardless of differences in belief or race. Viewing the solution to global oppression in revolutions similar to its own, Iran has promoted its revolutionary model as a prescription for other groups since the early years of the Revolution. Within this context, the exportation of the revolution has become one of Iran's key foreign policy instruments.

The export of the revolution, as articulated by Ayatollah Khomeini, is defined by general principles such as the necessity of sustaining the revolutionary model of *wilayat al-faqih* and Iran's responsibility towards Muslim societies, the poor, and the oppressed. The strategy of exporting the revolution is most evident in Iran's activities targeting Shiite communities. Shortly after the revolution, the exportation of the revolution was openly declared as a key objective by Iranian leaders (Osiewicz, 2021). This goal materialized in the form of providing support for Shiite groups, particularly in the Middle East, with efforts aimed at strengthening the autonomy and influence of these groups. Examples of this strategy include support for Hezbollah, financial and military assistance to Shiite groups in Iraq, and educational and financial aid to Shiite communities in Africa (Warnaar, 2013).

This approach has enabled Iran to pursue an influential policy in Africa, with the Sahel region becoming a critical target of these efforts (Osiewicz, 2021). Operating within a region traditionally regarded as part of France's sphere of influence, Iran has utilized religious diplomacy to establish relationships with Shiite communities and sought to influence local populations through various economic aid projects.

The concept of exporting the revolution is closely linked with the notions of strategic depth and resistance (Marsai and Rozsa, 2023). These two concepts define how Tehran engages with the external world, shapes its relations with international actors, and forms the foundation of Iran's multidimensional foreign policy strategy (Emery, 2013; Warnaar, 2013). Resistance serves as a key pillar of Iran's foreign policy, aimed at finding pathways out of international isolation. This approach underpins Iran's strategy of building regional and global alliances, particularly through the so-called "Axis of Resistance," which included Iran itself, Syria, Hezbollah, Hamas,

and pro-Iranian Shiite groups in Iraq and Yemen. However, as of December 2024, the status of Syria within the Axis of Resistance has changed. The Bashar al-Assad government in Syria, which had been a crucial ally within this axis, was overthrown by opposition groups, leading to the establishment of a Sunni-led government opposed to Iran. As a result, Syria has effectively withdrawn from the Axis of Resistance, marking a significant shift in the balance of Iran's regional alliances.

The Axis of Resistance has been utilized as a legitimizing tool in Iran's foreign policy, with the ideological foundation of this policy rooted in the portrayal of the West, particularly the United States, as the 'Great Satan' (Warnaar, 2013). This axis has been expanded to an international dimension through the support of global powers such as China and Russia, especially in the Middle East and various regions of Africa. Furthermore, Iran's support for the Houthis in Yemen has been a key element of its regional rivalry with Saudi Arabia (Emery, 2013). The Axis of Resistance also incorporates elements of Iran's soft power strategy. This approach includes the dissemination of the resistance ideology through media and religious diplomacy. One of the most prominent instruments of this strategy is Al-Mustafa International University, which plays a pivotal role in providing religious education to Shiite communities around the world. By doing so, Iran extends its sphere of influence and strengthens its ideological and political presence beyond its borders.

Strategic depth in Iran's foreign policy is based on the notion that Iran's sphere of influence and strategic interests extend beyond its national borders. This concept emphasizes that Iran's security and defense strategies are not confined to its territorial boundaries but are projected outward into broader regional arenas. In 2018, Major General Hossein Salami of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) stated that Iran had successfully waged a war against its enemies far beyond its geographical borders (Emery, 2013). He identified Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and the contested regions of Yemen as Iran's "first line of defense." This perspective illustrates how Iran views its regional allies and proxy forces as critical extensions of its own security apparatus. Similarly, in 2019, Ayatollah Ebrahim Raisi declared that during the Iran-Iraq War, Iran's southern and western borders were considered the state's frontline. However, he noted that, in the present era, Iran's borders are no longer limited to its geographical frontiers. Instead, he argued that Iran's border now encompasses what is referred to as "strategic depth," which includes regions as far-reaching as Yemen and Africa (Segall, 2019). This conceptualization reflects Iran's efforts to create a buffer zone of influence, thereby projecting power and countering external threats at a distance from its own territory.

Iran's Increasing Interest in the Sahel and Africa

Although Iran has historically maintained limited relations with Africa, the Islamic Republic can be considered a relative latecomer to the continent. Iran's

presence in Africa is driven by both ideological and pragmatic motives. During the Cold War, Iran supported the decolonization process in Africa (Mathur, 2023). Following the 1979 Islamic Revolution, the foreign policy doctrine of “neither East nor West, but the Islamic Republic” aligned with the geopolitical context of the Cold War. This doctrine facilitated Iran's engagement with African states and the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), offering a pathway for the Islamic Republic to break free from the isolation it faced after the Revolution. As a result, this period marked a new phase in Iran-Africa relations.

Especially when the Islamic Republic joined the NAM in 1979, the Islamic Revolution's revolutionary nature won support in post-colonial Africa. Iran's rejection of the influence of major powers, encapsulated in the “neither East nor West” political doctrine and, more recently, the “resistance” slogan, became a significant pillar of its ideological commitment. The Iran-Iraq War between 1980 and 1988 provided Tehran with further impetus to strengthen its diplomatic engagement with African states. Iran made a concerted effort to form a unified diplomatic front with African nations in regional and global fora, such as the African Union (AU), the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), and the NAM, in order to condemn and isolate Iraq (Marsai and Rozsa, 2023). However, Iran's engagement in Africa has been neither consistent nor effective. While its ideological alignment with anti-colonial narratives and its efforts to present itself as a third alternative in the Cold War context allowed it to establish a foothold in Africa, the depth and sustainability of its influence have remained limited.

Iran's Africa policies possess a multi-layered structure aimed at strengthening the country's geopolitical position and establishing a presence that supports its broader foreign policy objectives. The strategic goal of these policies is to project Iran as more than a mere regional power, exert pressure on its rivals (particularly the United States) gain political and economic advantages, mitigate the effects of sanctions, and counter isolation strategies imposed on it by building alliances. In response to the need to combat sanctions and export its revolutionary worldview, Iran has adopted a “pivot to Africa” policy (Toĝa, 2024). Within this framework, Iran seeks to combat isolation and sanctions by forming partnerships with states, autonomous regions, and non-state actors. Leveraging both hard and soft power tools, Iran has intensified its efforts, especially after the assassination of Qassem Soleimani, to expand its influence within the so-called “Axis of Resistance.” This conceptualization underscores Iran's broader strategy to establish a more robust presence among both state and non-state actors in Africa. As a result, Iran's engagement with Africa has become a more deliberate and sustained effort aimed at securing political influence, economic partnerships, and ideological footholds across the continent.

Iran's shift toward Africa seeks to expand its geopolitical reach throughout the continent. Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei has emphasized the necessity of extending

Iran's strategic depth beyond the Middle East to include Africa. This approach aligns with Tehran's broader ambition to reduce its vulnerability to external pressures, establish a diversified network of alliances, and promote its ideological and political agenda on a global scale. By doing so, Iran aims to challenge Western hegemony and create a multi-dimensional foreign policy that reduces its dependence on any one region or alliance.

Sudan has historically served as Iran's most significant foothold for expanding its influence in Africa. Following Omar al-Bashir's rise to power in 1989, Sudan became one of Iran's first zones of influence on the continent (United Against Nuclear Iran, 2024). Upon assuming power, Bashir adopted rhetoric favorable to Iran and, in 1991, made an official visit to the country. Later that year, Iranian President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani visited Sudan, where he emphasized that Sudan's change in leadership could serve as a source of movement and revolution in the Islamic world. This visit symbolized the growing ideological and strategic alignment between the two states. During this period, Sudan and Iran forged a strategic partnership through a series of economic and military agreements.

However, Iran's influence in East Africa waned during the presidency of Mohammad Khatami between 1997 and 2005, as many African countries, including Sudan, strengthened their ties with the United States. The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, prompted a shift in U.S. foreign policy, leading to closer relations with African nations such as Ethiopia, Djibouti, Somalia, Kenya, and Sudan. These countries collaborated with the U.S. on its counter-terrorism initiatives, which effectively limited Iran's influence in the region. Except for Eritrea—then engaged in a conflict with Ethiopia—East African countries generally aligned with Western powers during this period. This shift in alliances weakened Iran's capacity to sustain its influence in East Africa, particularly in the face of U.S.-led counter-terrorism efforts and the region's growing integration into Western security and economic frameworks.

Iran maintained its relations with African countries to the extent allowed by the international context. President Mohammad Khatami played a significant role in revitalizing Iran's engagement with Africa. In 2004, he visited Sudan, and in 2005, his final year in office, he toured several African nations, including Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Mali, Benin, Zimbabwe, and Uganda. These visits were indicative of Iran's intention to strengthen its diplomatic ties with African states and establish a foothold on the continent.

With the rise of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to power in 2005, Iran's discourse on Africa shifted significantly. Ahmadinejad framed Africa as a continent subjected to exploitation by the United States and presented Iran as a global leader in the fight against oppression and exploitation. Iran's strategy during Ahmadinejad's presidency was to present itself as a champion of anti-colonial resistance and solidarity with the

Global South. This approach not only aligned with Iran's ideological stance but also served a pragmatic purpose: to counter international sanctions and reduce its economic vulnerability. Thomas Juneau argues that Iran's cooperation with Africa during this period was a deliberate effort to find an escape route from Western economic sanctions. By seeking new markets in African countries, Iran aimed to reduce the economic pressure caused by sanctions and diversify its economy. This strategy was part of a broader effort to protect Iran's foreign policy interests and economic stability (Juneau, 2015). Similarly, Maaïke Warnaar emphasizes that Africa attracted greater attention from Iran during Ahmadinejad's presidency. In addition to Africa, Ahmadinejad's administration strengthened ties with Latin American and Asian countries as part of a broader strategy to overcome the West's isolation measures. His frequent visits to African countries and diplomatic initiatives aimed to expand Iran's influence on the continent and build stronger ties with non-Western states (Warnaar, 2013). These efforts were in line with Iran's broader strategy to challenge Western hegemony and align with developing nations in a show of solidarity against Western influence.

Ahmadinejad's Africa policy was based on three key pillars: strengthening ties with Shiite Islamic communities, promoting South-South cooperation, and fostering anti-Western sentiment (Mathur, 2023). In this context, Iran focused primarily on strengthening relations with West African countries. It established Shiite cultural and educational centers in countries such as Ivory Coast, Liberia, and Cameroon. These cultural initiatives aimed to deepen Iran's ideological influence and spread Shiite teachings in these regions. In addition to religious diplomacy, Iran also engaged in development initiatives as part of its South-South cooperation policy. Key projects included the construction of hospitals, the establishment of companies, and the provision of loans to African countries. These infrastructure investments aimed to enhance Iran's presence and build goodwill among local populations. The development programs were implemented through Iran's prominent institutions such as the Mostazafan Foundation, the Iranian Red Crescent Society, the Ministry of Islamic Guidance and Culture, the Organization for Islamic Culture and Communication, and Al-Mustafa International University. In addition to these formal institutions, parliamentary groups, friendship associations, chambers of commerce, charities, religious seminaries, and universities also played a role in supporting Iran's agenda in Africa.

Another notable actor in this strategy was the Struggle of Construction, which provided a range of development assistance to countries and groups across Africa. This organization played a key role in executing Iran's soft power strategy on the continent. By focusing on development and humanitarian aid, Iran sought to establish a positive image and secure political support from African states. This strategy yielded

tangible results, as demonstrated in 2009 when all West African states voted in favor of Iran during a United Nations vote on Iran's human rights situation. This event highlighted the effectiveness of Iran's soft power strategy in Africa.

Iran's pivot toward Africa and its search for allies on the continent were aimed at providing a moral and diplomatic cover for its nuclear activities and compensating for its deteriorating relations with Europe and Asia at the time. Additionally, it sought to create alternative sources of revenue for Iran's sanctions-stricken economy and to counter international efforts to isolate the regime. In 2006, Iran participated as a guest of honor at the African Union (AU) summit. However, its emphasis on anti-Americanism did not achieve significant success, as most African countries had already turned toward the West. As a result, Iran's influence remained limited to a few states, particularly Sudan and Eritrea. The limitations of Iran's engagement in Africa became evident in 2010 when the African members of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC)—Gabon, Nigeria, and Uganda—all voted in favor of sanctions against Iran due to its nuclear program. This vote resulted in UNSC Resolution 1929, underscoring the limited success of Iran's efforts to win the support of African states.

Due to the sanctions imposed under U.S. leadership and the resulting international isolation, the Iranian economy experienced a significant decline. Consequently, with the election of President Hassan Rouhani in 2013, Iran's foreign policy shifted its primary focus toward rapprochement with the West in an effort to resolve the impasse over Iran's nuclear program. In this context, African countries were not a priority in Iran's foreign policy agenda. Evidence of the Rouhani administration's neglect of Africa can be seen in the absence of official visits to the continent and the decline in Iran-Africa trade. Although President Rouhani described Africa as one of Iran's most important priorities and called for the strengthening of political, economic, and cultural relations with African countries, he made little effort to sustain these ties. During his presidency, Rouhani did not travel to Africa even once. The only African heads of state to visit Iran during his term were the presidents of Ghana, South Africa, and Zimbabwe. After the signing of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2015, Iran's efforts to open its economy to the world did not include Africa as a significant focus. Trade with Sub-Saharan Africa reached an all-time low in 2015, and throughout Rouhani's presidency, Africa accounted for less than 1% of Iran's total trade volume (United Against Nuclear Iran, 2024).

The election of Ebrahim Raisi as Iran's new president in 2021 marked the beginning of a new era in Tehran's foreign policy toward Africa. During this period, Iran sought to intensify its nuclear program, which, in turn, led to the continuation of international sanctions and heightened economic challenges. To mitigate the financial impact of these sanctions, Africa was viewed as an alternative to Western markets. In 2023, Raisi made an official visit to Kenya, Uganda, and Zimbabwe, marking the first

visit of an Iranian president to an African country in a decade. This visit symbolized a renewed effort to strengthen ties with Africa. The primary driving force behind Iran's renewed focus on Africa was its perception of the continent as a means to undermine the effectiveness of international sanctions. In other words, Africa was seen as a key element of Iran's "resistance economy" strategy. This approach was based on the idea of diversifying trade partners to reduce Iran's reliance on traditional Western markets.

Iran's interest in Africa was further fueled by the economic potential of several African countries, notably Sudan, Djibouti, Eritrea, and Ethiopia. Those countries reported annual economic growth rates of 5-9%, which made them attractive partners for Tehran. However, Iran's efforts to develop stronger ties with the Horn of Africa faced significant challenges. Many countries in the region, such as Djibouti and Ethiopia, opted for financial incentives and aid packages from Gulf countries, which diminished Iran's ability to establish a foothold in this strategic area. Consequently, the Horn of Africa did not become the lucrative alternative market that Iran had hoped for. Despite these limitations, Iran's diplomatic efforts in Africa achieved notable results. By 2023, Iran had established 42 embassies and consulates across Africa. These diplomatic missions were located in Algeria, Angola, Benin, Burundi, Botswana, **Burkina Faso**, **Cameroon**, Cape Verde, Central African Republic, Congo, **Eritrea**, Ethiopia, Gabon, **Gambia**, Ghana, **Guinea**, Ivory Coast, Kenya, Lesotho, Liberia, Libya, Madagascar, Malawi, **Mali**, **Mauritania**, Mauritius, Morocco, Mozambique, Namibia, **Niger**, **Nigeria**, Rwanda, Sao Tome and Principe, **Senegal**, Seychelles, Sierra Leone, South Africa, Swaziland, Tanzania, Tunisia, Uganda, Zambia, and Zimbabwe.³¹ Meanwhile, 17 African embassies and consulates were established in Iran (Marsai and Rozsa, 2023). This expansion of diplomatic missions underscored Tehran's sustained efforts to strengthen political, economic, and cultural ties with African countries. By fostering diplomatic representation, Iran aimed to enhance its influence in the continent and reduce the impact of sanctions by diversifying its trade partners and geopolitical alliances.

Iran's Nature of Activities in the Sahel

Iran employs various tactical-level policies in the Sahel region to achieve its strategic objectives. In addition to its general approach, Iran frequently identifies the specific challenges faced by target countries and offers concrete solutions accordingly. Efforts to establish closer ties are often articulated through diplomatic, political, security, maritime, health, education, trade, and cultural exchange initiatives. These efforts are frequently accompanied by proposals for infrastructure development and technology transfer, which serve as key instruments for deepening Iran's influence and strengthening its relationships with Sahelian states.

³¹ The states of Sahel are presented in bold.

In the context of Africa, Iran advances its engagements with state and non-state actors on three distinct levels. If the counterpart adheres to a religion other than Islam or if such groups form the majority in the target country, Iran employs a strategy of humanitarian aid and direct offers to meet essential needs. These initiatives include technology transfer, economic agreements, the construction of hospitals and orphanages, educational programs, student exchange programs and the trade in arms. These measures aim to attract and influence the target actor. If the counterpart is Muslim but not Shiite, Iran emphasizes the importance of unity and solidarity against common adversaries, advocating for a united Islamic front. In this approach, Iran highlights its commitment to stand by and support all Muslims worldwide, regardless of sectarian differences. In this context, the concepts of *tawhid* (unity of God) and *ummah* (the global Muslim community) are frequently invoked to reinforce the message of Islamic unity. If the counterpart is inclined to align with Iran's influence, Iran provides ideological and military support. For actors who are already Shiite, Iran seeks to establish them as a proxy power within its Axis of Resistance. The approach taken depends on the governance structure under which the targeted Shiite actors operate. If these groups exist under a strong, centralized state, Iran employs propaganda activities to increase its ideological influence. On the other hand, if these groups operate within a failed or fragile state, Iran provides them with weapons and military equipment to strengthen their capacity for influence and control. In this context, Iran's activities in the Sahel region are categorized into four key dimensions: religious, military, economic, and proxy. These areas are not strictly separate but rather frequently intersect with one another.

Iran's religious, ideological, and military relations with the countries of the Sahel region are directly linked to its regional and international strategic objectives. These relationships are among the key pillars of Iran's strategy to promote Shiite Islam, expand the Axis of Resistance, and establish an alternative power center against the West. State-to-state relations between the Islamic Republic and various African countries are influenced by internal political changes within Iran and African states, as well as by the interests of regional powers and global actors in the region.

Iran conducts many of these activities through non-state institutions, with organizations operating in the fields of health and education playing a particularly effective role in supporting the Islamic Republic. Key institutions in this process include the Iranian Red Crescent Society, the Imam Khomeini Relief Committee, the *Bonyad-e Mostazafan*, *J-e Sazandegi*, and Al-Mustafa International University (Emery, 2013). These organizations serve as critical instruments for engaging with local communities, although even their success appears limited by their identification as Iranian institutions (Marsai and Rozsa, 2023). The Iranian Red Crescent Society plays a prominent role in Iran's activities in Africa. It established its first medical clinic in 1997

in Niamey, the capital of Niger. Over time, several clinics were set up in areas with relatively large Shiite populations, particularly in regions near the Nigerian border. However, clinics and health centers were also established in countries such as Mali, Ghana, Côte d'Ivoire, Uganda, Kenya, Burundi, and several others to serve populations that were neither Shiite nor Muslim. This approach reflects Iran's broader strategy of building relationships and influence across diverse religious and social groups in the region.

During the 1980s, Iran intensified its religious aid efforts by implementing an initiative to establish a network of Shiite clerics who have since operated for various purposes, including terrorism. A 1984 report by the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency revealed that Iran's Ministry of Islamic Guidance sent clerics to Africa to encourage Shiite Muslims to resist governments they viewed as illegitimate authorities (United Against Nuclear Iran, 2024). The clerics engaged in ideological propaganda to instill in their followers the belief that it was a religious duty to establish Shiite-dominated governments loyal to Iran's Supreme Leader. The CIA report also documented that hundreds of students from Ghana, Mali, Mauritania, Nigeria, Niger, and Senegal participated in theological education programs in Iran.

The Iranian Embassy has played a significant role in promoting Shiism in Senegal. Iran's relations with Dakar date back to the era of the Shah. However, in 1984, the embassy was closed by the Dakar government on the grounds of engaging in Islamic propaganda. The Iranian Embassy in Senegal was reopened in the early 1990s and resumed its activities to promote Shiite Islam. The participation of Iranian President Rafsanjani in the Organization of Islamic Cooperation meeting held in Dakar in 1991 and the visit of Senegalese President Wade to Iran in 2003 were significant moments for cooperation between the two sides. Each year, on the anniversary of the Islamic Revolution, Iranians organize a reception for prominent Lebanese and Senegalese Muslims and financed the participation of Senegalese intellectuals in Islamic conferences held in Tehran (Leichtman, 2006).

In Nigeria, Iran's efforts to provide religious education to students for propaganda purposes date back to the 1980s. During this period, Sheikh Zakzaky, despite being a Sunni, became one of the first African Islamic leaders to be invited by the Islamic Republic (United Against Nuclear Iran, 2024). Zakzaky was a follower of Sayyid Qutb, a leading thinker of the Muslim Brotherhood. Influenced by the Iranian Revolution and its revolutionary ideology, Zakzaky returned to Nigeria and merged Khomeini's discourse and ideas with the ideology of the Muslim Brotherhood.

In addition to establishing religious ties with states in the region, Iran has also sought to develop economic and military cooperation. In this context, it has engaged in defense agreements, military training activities, and security partnerships with certain countries in the Sahel region. Iran's military relations have been conducted

through both direct and indirect channels. Direct military relations include activities such as military agreements, arms supply, and joint military training programs. Indirect military relations, on the other hand, involve support for militia groups, the use of hybrid warfare tactics, and efforts to exert influence through ongoing conflicts in the region. Within this framework, Iran has developed significant military relations with countries such as Sudan and Eritrea in the Sahel region. These relationships have played a crucial role in Iran's broader strategy to expand its influence and enhance its military presence in the region.

Sudan has been one of Iran's most important partners in terms of military relations (Scollon, 2024). The rise of Omar al-Bashir to power in 1989 marked a strategic shift in Iran-Sudan relations. During this period, military and security cooperation between the two countries increased significantly, with Iran transferring weapons to Sudan (Pham, 2022). According to a report, Tehran became Khartoum's second-largest arms supplier after China (United Against Nuclear Iran, 2024). This cooperation enabled Sudan to use Iranian weapons in its internal conflicts and transformed Sudan into one of Iran's key logistical hubs in Africa. In the early 1990s, members of IRGC provided training to religiously motivated militants in Sudan (Marsai and Rozsa, 2023). Iran's military relations were not limited to equipment support. It also contributed to the establishment of military facilities and weapons factories on Sudanese soil. One of the most prominent examples of these efforts was the construction of the Yarmouk Weapons Factory. This facility became a symbol of Iran's attempts to build military infrastructure in Sudan. In 2012, the Yarmouk factory was bombed by Israel, bringing Iran's military presence in Sudan to the forefront of international attention. It was alleged that the facility was constructed to increase Iran's military influence in the region and serve as a hub for arms exports.

Eritrea has been another key partner for Iran in terms of military relations. Due to its strategic location along the Red Sea, Eritrea holds critical importance for Iran. Iran views Eritrea as a strategic ally in its efforts to control the Red Sea and monitor maritime trade routes in the region. Following Eritrea's isolation by Western powers after its conflict with Ethiopia, Iran saw an opportunity to expand its sphere of influence in the country. According to a report, Iran began supplying Eritrea with long-range missiles as early as 2008 (United Against Nuclear Iran, 2024). In addition, it has been alleged that Iran deployed operators from the IRGC Quds Force, naval officers, and military experts to Eritrea to support Eritrea's proxy war in Somalia (Writer, 2009). Eritrea's public declaration of support for Iran's nuclear program further solidified their relationship, with Iran reportedly depositing \$35 million into Eritrea's central bank as a sign of goodwill and strategic alignment. Eritrea's strategic position was seen as a vital opportunity for Iran. It has been claimed that Eritrea served as a logistical hub for the transfer of weapons and munitions from Iran to the Houthi forces in Yemen (Marsai

and Rozsa, 2023). Furthermore, Eritrea facilitated a connection between Iran and Syria through the Red Sea and the Suez Canal, enhancing Iran's strategic reach in the region. To maintain a long-term presence in the area, Iran utilized Eritrea's Assab Port as a base of operations. From there, it conducted anti-piracy missions in the waters off the coast of Somalia, protecting Iranian commercial ships (Marsai and Rozsa, 2023).

Iran's economic relations with the Sahel region are driven more by its strategy to counter international sanctions and establish new trade partnerships than by regional development goals. The Sahel holds strategic importance as an alternative to Western markets. To strengthen these ties, Iran engages in trade, investment, financial aid, and infrastructure projects, aiming to diversify its economy and support its foreign policy objectives. Trade is a key component of Iran's economic activities in the Sahel. Faced with sanctions that limit its market access, Iran seeks to expand its trade network in the region. It engages in the trade of agricultural products, mining, energy, and raw materials with Sahelian countries. Niger and Burkina Faso, with their rich reserves of uranium, gold, and other strategic minerals, have drawn Iran's attention. Iran has pursued efforts to secure raw materials and establish joint ventures in the mining sector. Niger's uranium reserves, in particular, are seen as a strategic asset that could support Iran's nuclear program. During President Ahmadinejad's term between 2005 and 2013, Iran prioritized relations with these countries to secure access to uranium while maximizing its bargaining power in nuclear negotiations (United Against Nuclear Iran, 2024). However, such initiatives have often been limited due to the risk of violating international sanctions imposed on Iran. Another aspect of Iran's economic activities in the Sahel is its involvement in the energy sector. Iran aims to collaborate with energy-rich countries to develop energy infrastructure and establish itself as a key player in these markets. In this context, it has pursued energy projects with countries such as Nigeria, Mali, and Chad (United Against Nuclear Iran, 2024).

Iran's relations with proxies in the Sahel region serves as another key foreign policy tool to advance its regional and international strategic objectives. Through these groups, Iran seeks to increase its ideological influence and counter the presence of Western and Gulf powers in the region. These relationships manifest in the form of financial support, arms transfers, training programs, and logistical aid. The security vacuum in the Sahel has provided Iran with an opportunity to establish new proxy groups and collaborate with existing ones. One of Iran's most significant proxy connections in the Sahel is with Hezbollah's networks in West Africa. Iran's support for Hezbollah in Lebanon and its encouragement of Hezbollah's activities in the Sahel are part of its broader strategy to expand regional influence. Hezbollah's extensive diaspora in West Africa allows it to control networks related to trade, finance, and smuggling operations. In this context, Iran has supported Hezbollah's commercial and

financial networks in countries such as Guinea, Sierra Leone, Côte d'Ivoire, and Nigeria (United Against Nuclear Iran, 2024). This support has enabled Hezbollah to establish connections with local militia groups and provide logistical backing to Iran-aligned actors in the region.

Nigeria has become a focal point of Hezbollah's proxy activities (Scollon, 2024). Iran's involvement drew international attention when a shipment of weapons allegedly linked to Iran was seized in Nigeria in 2010. The discovery exposed Iran's covert supply of arms to groups in West Africa, revealing that the transfers were conducted through international maritime shipping routes. This incident highlighted the operational reach of Iran's proxy network and its role in supporting Hezbollah-linked groups and pro-Iranian actors in the region.

Conclusion

Iran's engagement in the Sahel and Horn of Africa reflects its broader geopolitical strategy to expand its influence and counterbalance Western and Gulf powers. While its activities have yielded some success, especially in Nigeria, Burkina Faso, and Eritrea, Iran's role remains contested within the larger regional and global security framework. The Sahel and Horn of Africa have become arenas for proxy conflicts and geopolitical rivalry. Iran's ideological, political, and military pursuits often clash with those of Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Western actors like the United States and France. This rivalry has transformed the region into a battleground for influence, complicating local security dynamics and fostering instability.

A critical dimension of Iran's Sahel strategy is exporting its revolutionary ideology. Rooted in the dichotomy of the 'oppressed vs. oppressors' and the principle of *wilayat al-faqih*, Iran's ideological discourse is presented as a moral imperative to support vulnerable communities. However, this ideological framework has limited resonance in the Sahel, where Sunni Islam predominates, and Iranian influence is often met with suspicion. While Iran's support for Shiite communities and educational outreach through institutions like Al-Mustafa International University have had some impact, they remain insufficient to challenge the hegemony of Gulf actors who are well-funded and better positioned to appeal to local populations.

The recent overthrow of the Bashar al-Assad regime in Syria has profound implications for Iran's role in the Sahel and Horn of Africa. As a key member of Iran's Axis of Resistance, Syria had long served as a vital conduit for the transfer of arms and fighters to Hezbollah and other Iranian-aligned groups. With Assad's departure, Iran faces the potential loss of a critical ally, disrupting its logistical pathways and undermining its influence in regions like the Sahel. This development could force Iran to reevaluate its approach to Africa, prompting one of two possible trajectories.

On the one hand, Iran may adopt a more aggressive strategy in the Sahel and Horn of Africa, compensating for its reduced influence in the Levant. This approach could involve intensifying its engagement with proxy groups, bolstering its naval presence in maritime corridors, and enhancing support for local militant actors. By doing so, Iran would aim to project power in new theaters to offset its diminished position in Syria. On the other hand, Iran may pursue a more conciliatory strategy, seeking to de-escalate tensions with Western actors in order to reduce pressure on its economy and geopolitical position. In this scenario, Iran might scale back its provocative actions in the Sahel, limit its support for local armed groups, and focus on improving diplomatic engagement with key European powers. Such a shift would align with Iran's broader strategy of securing economic relief and negotiating sanctions reductions.

In conclusion, Iran's Sahel policy must be understood within the broader context of regional and global security. Iran's ideological, military, and proxy-based activities in the Sahel and Horn of Africa present both direct and indirect challenges to stability in these regions. While Iran's ideological appeal is limited, its ability to manipulate security vacuums and leverage proxy networks remains a powerful tool for projecting influence. The geopolitical rivalry between Iran, Gulf actors, and Western powers adds a further layer of complexity, as these actors compete for influence in fragile and strategically vital regions. The fall of Assad's regime in Syria could disrupt Iran's logistical supply chains, weakening its reach in the Sahel. However, it could also trigger a recalibration of Iran's regional strategy, leading to increased activity in African theaters where the Gulf's influence remains dominant. Ultimately, the future trajectory of Iran's engagement in the Sahel will depend on its capacity to adapt to new geopolitical realities, secure new logistical hubs, and maintain the operational flexibility required to sustain its ideological and military ambitions.

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PART III: REGIONAL SECURITY CHALLENGES

CHAPTER 12

Sahel and Security: Situational Overview and Challenges Ahead

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Abstract

The aim of this chapter is to give a thorough overview of the security situation of the Sahel region. The loosely defined area of a set of ten diverse countries covering slightly less than one fourth of the African continent with around a quarter of its population, represents a region highly significant for the security of the continent as well as for European security. Therefore identifying key issues, understanding the situation and the dynamics of this 'chain of countries' is crucial. In order to have a deeper situational awareness, the chapter uses Barry Buzan's sectoral concept of security, reviewing the situation through the political, economic, societal, environmental and military aspects.

The chapter aims to gather data, including the most important indicators that represent the given area while highlighting the gravest challenges. Although knowing that to gather a final and all-inclusive 'list of challenges' would be practically impossible, on the other hand, having even an incomplete list of factors that make certain countries, sub-regions or even the entire Sahel less stable or cause more tensions domestically or internationally (regionally), would mean that the local (regional, continental) or other non-African players can intervene in time in order to avoid escalation and the even greater challenges of possible spillover effects into neighbouring regions or continents.

The region's numerous ongoing conflicts, the series of recent coups d'état, the growing presence of armed groups, as well as the increasing activities of international terrorist organisations in the region are all the products of these problems, therefore analysing the root causes might enable the provision of timely solutions.

Prologue

Depending on the source, this loosely defined area consists of a number of countries. One of the most commonly used definitions was set by the UN Security

Council in 2013 in the United Nations Integrated Strategy for the Sahel (UNISS), which includes Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Chad, the Gambia, Guinea, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria and Senegal.³² However, since the Sahel (coast or shore in Arabic) (Oxford Reference), a semi-arid, belt-like biogeographical region, is in fact a transition zone between the Sahara Desert to the north and a more tropical area to the south, it stretches through the continent from the westernmost continental African country Senegal to Sudan and Eritrea on the shore of the Red Sea, so these two countries will be mentioned (in *Italic*) as well in order to offer a more complete picture.³³

When talking about security from a more comprehensive perspective, Barry Buzan's sectorial approach offers a multidomain perspective including political, economic, societal, environmental and military sectors, five areas outlined by Buzan in his paper '*New Patterns of Global Security in the Twenty-First Century*' (Buzan, 1991) were published more than three decades ago, it could not possibly include back then a nowadays important field.

The chapter will reference elements of the other chapters related to '*Regional Security Challenges*' in this volume, such as coups, water and food safety, terrorism and counter-terrorism, migration, religion and the humanitarian situation.

For a better understanding of the area of interest and the individual countries themselves, find below a chart with some basic information about the region.

³² United Nations Development Programme. (2021). *A Regeneration: Implementing the United Nations Integrated Strategy for the Sahel (UNISS): UNDP's contribution (2021)*. UNDP. Retrieved November 10, 2024, from <https://www.undp.org/africa/waca/publications/regeneration-implementing-united-nations-integrated-strategy-sahel-uniss-undps-contribution#>.

³³ The African Centre for the Study and Research on Terrorism uses an even wider set of countries that includes Algeria and South Sudan as well. Aubyn, F. K., Ziblim, I., & Apau, R. (2022). (publication). *Coups d'état and Political Instability in the Sahel: Implications for the Fight against Terrorism and Violent Extremism*. Retrieved January 12, 2025, from <https://reliefweb.int/attachments/881c3312-2164-45aa-ae49-b86d855775ee/final-policy-paper-coups200522.pdf>.

#	Country	Area	Population	GDP / capita (PPP) USD	Former colonial power
1	Burkina Faso	274 200	23 251 490	2,726.9 (17)	France
2	Cameroon	475 440	28 647 290	5,380.2 (43)	(Germany) - United Kingdom - France
3	Chad	1 284 000	18 278 570	1,969.3 (13)	France
4	The Gambia	11 300	2 773 170	3,162.5 (25)	United Kingdom
5	Guinea	245 857	14 190 610	4,429.3 (37)	France
6	Mali	1 240 192	23 293 700	2,726.0 (16)	France
7	Mauritania	1 030 700	4 862 990	6,934.3 (54)	France
8	Niger	1 267 000	27 202 840	1,817.3 (8)	France
9	Nigeria	923 768	223 804 630	6,318.2 (50)	United Kingdom
10	Senegal	196 722	17 763 160	4,833.0 (39)	France
	SUMMA	6 949 179	384 068 450	40 297	
	All Africa	30 365 000	1 488 986 139		
		22.89 %	26.79 %		
11	<i>Eritrea</i>	<i>117 600</i>	<i>3 748 900</i>	<i>1,628.8 (5)</i>	<i>Italy (-United Kingdom)</i>
12	<i>Sudan</i>	<i>1 861 484</i>	<i>48 109 010</i>	<i>3,137.2 (23)</i>	<i>United Kingdom - Egypt</i>

Figure 1 Basic data and key indicators of the Sahelian States (10+2) (World Bank-c, -e, -a)
[Author's own graph]

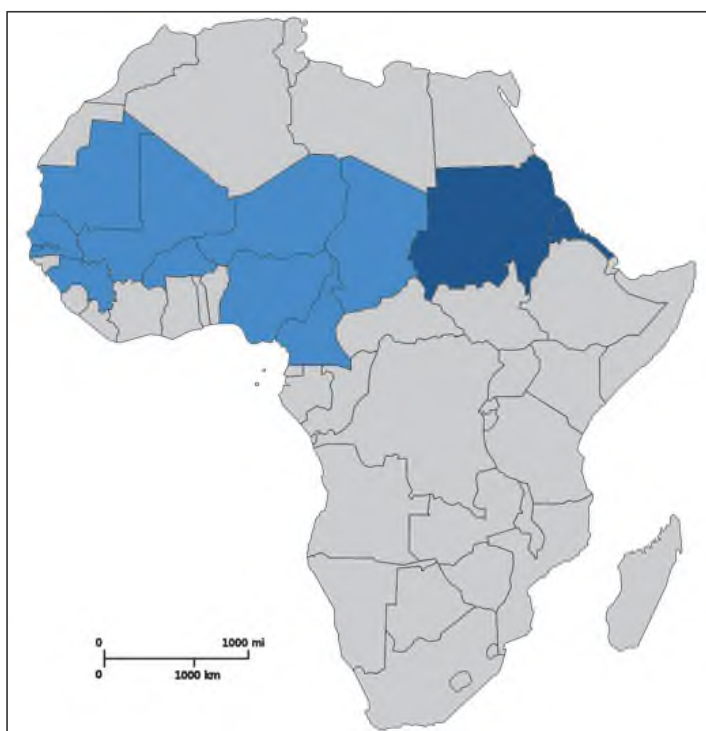


Figure 2 *The Sahelian States (10+2) [Author's own graph]*

Sahel and the political sector

Since politics is the greatest influencer of our lives and intertwines with our lives every day, with a direct influence on all other sectors of security, let us start our approach with the political segment.

Although this chapter will not get into deeper analysis of the coups, it is still necessary to have a better understanding, since undemocratic and forceful changes of regimes have been a feature of the history of the Sahelian states since the first days of their independence, though the relevant countries show a wide variation in the numbers of coups. During the roughly seven decades in question, the highest number of coups – eight – took place both in Burkina Faso (AfricaNews, 2022) and in Nigeria (Xerion, 2019); seven in Sudan (BBC, 2021); six in Chad (Vogel, 2024b) and Mauritania (Bensaid, 2019); five in Mali (Tchioffo, 2022) and in neighbouring Niger (Al Jazeera, 2023); three in Guinea (Siegle & Eizenga, 2021); and one in The Gambia (Saine, 1996); while none in Cameroon (Vogel, 2024a), Eritrea (The University of Illinois Cline Center) or Senegal (Sambou, 2024) (see Figure 3 below).

1956-1960	1961-1965	1966-1970	1971-1975	1976-1980	1981-1985	1986-1990
1958 <i>Sudan</i>		1966 Burkina Faso 1966 Nigeria 1966 Nigeria 1968 Mali 1969 <i>Sudan</i>	1971 <i>Sudan</i> 1974 Niger 1975 Chad 1975 Chad 1975 Nigeria	1976 Nigeria 1978 Mauritania 1979 Chad 1979 Mauritania 1980 Burkina Faso 1980 Mauritania	1982 Burkina Faso 1982 Chad 1983 Burkina Faso 1983 Nigeria 1984 Guinea 1984 Mauritania 1985 Nigeria 1985 <i>Sudan</i>	1987 Burkina Faso 1989 <i>Sudan</i> 1990 Chad 1990 Nigeria

1991-1995	1996-2000	2001-2005	2006-2010	2011-2015	2016-2020	2021-2024
1991 Mali 1993 Nigeria 1994 The Gambia	1996 Niger 1999 Niger	2005 Mauritania	2008 Guinea 2008 Mauritania 2010 Niger	2012 Mali 2014 Burkina Faso	2019 <i>Sudan</i> 2020 Mali	2021 Chad 2021 Guinea 2021 Mali 2021 <i>Sudan</i> 2022 Burkina Faso 2022 Burkina Faso 2023 Niger

Figure 3 *Coups d'état and military coups d'état in the Sahelian States (10+2) [Author's own graph]*

The political instability caused by coups usually starts a domino effect in other areas of life as well, and political leaders who grabbed power this way tend to curb freedoms and rights and limit the authority of democratic institutions.

The international think-tank Freedom House has been compiling its ‘*Freedom in the World*’ report since 1973. The chart below lists the values of the comprehensive analyses since the Millennium (see Figure 4). The chart clearly shows how politically volatile the region is, with only 25 occasions being of a country being free out of the 288, and with the majority – 158 – marked as not free. This situation usually also means that the oppression or the limited freedom serves as a hotbed for armed struggles in society and scares away the investors.

	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
BFA	PF	PF	PF	PF	PF	PF	PF	PF	PF	PF	PF	PF	PF	PF	<u>PF</u>	PF	PF	PF	PF	PF	PF	PF	<u>NE</u>	NE
CMR	NF	NF	NF	NF	NF	NF	NF	NF	NF	NF	NF	NF	NF	NF	NF	NF	NF	NF	NF	NF	NF	NF	NF	NF
TCR	NF	NF	NF	NF	NF	NF	NF	NF	NF	NF	NF	NF	NF	NF	NF	NF	NF	NF	NF	NF	NF	<u>NE</u>	NF	NF
GMB	NF	PF	PF	PF	PF	PF	PF	PF	PF	PF	PF	NF	NF	NF	NF	NF	NF	PF	PF	PF	PF	PF	PF	PF
GIN	NF	NF	NF	NF	NF	NF	NF	NF	<u>NE</u>	NF	PF	PF	PF	PF	PF	PF	PF	PF	PF	PF	PF	<u>NE</u>	NF	NF
MLI	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	<u>NE</u>	PF	PF	PF	PF	PF	PF	PF	<u>NE</u>	<u>NE</u>	NF	NE
MRT	NF	PF	PF	NF	NF	<u>PF</u>	PF	PF	<u>NE</u>	NF	NF	NF	NF	NF	NF	NF	NF	NF	NF	NF	PF	PF	PF	PF
NER	PF	PF	PF	PF	PF	PF	PF	PF	PF	PF	<u>PF</u>	PF	PF	PF	PF	PF	PF	PF	PF	PF	PF	PF	PF	<u>PF</u>
NGA	PF	PF	PF	PF	PF	PF	PF	PF	PF	PF	PF	PF	PF	PF	PF	PF	PF	PF	PF	PF	PF	PF	PF	PF
SEN	PF	PF	F	F	F	F	F	PF	PF	PF	PF	PF	F	F	F	F	F	F	PF	PF	PF	PF	PF	PF
ERI	NF	NF	NF	NF	NF	NF	NF	NF	NF	NF	NF	NF	NF	NF	NF	NF	NF	NF	NF	NF	NF	NF	NF	NF
SDN	NF	NF	NF	NF	NF	NF	NF	NF	NF	NF	NF	NF	NF	NF	NF	NF	NF	NF	NF	<u>NE</u>	NF	<u>NE</u>	NF	NF

Figure 4 *Rankings of the Sahelian States (10+2) by the Freedom House in their annual Freedom in the World report (Freedom House) (NF in red – not free, PF in orange – partially free, F in green – free, letters in bold and underlined represent a year with a coup). [Author's own graph]*

Another indicator in this field is World Bank Group’s *Worldwide Governance Indicator*, composed of six broad dimensions of governance, among which *Political Stability and Absence of Violence/Terrorism* captures perceptions of the likelihood of political instability and/or politically motivated violence, including terrorism. Although measuring political stability or even the presence of terrorism are highly complex and estimations cannot always be totally accurate, analysing the tendencies and the dynamics of a given country over a longer period of time – in our case more than two decades – can give an idea about the changes and challenges a given country is facing during those years. The chart below can also help to compare countries and how they are managing in this regard.

Regarding our set of countries, ranging from the year 2000 to 2023 tendencies clearly show the negative developments (see Figure 5 below), with the exception of Senegal, Guinea and Sudan (in bold and Italic), however it needs to be highlighted that even in these few cases, the analysed period includes a higher value before, meaning there is a worsening situation at least towards the end of our timeframe.

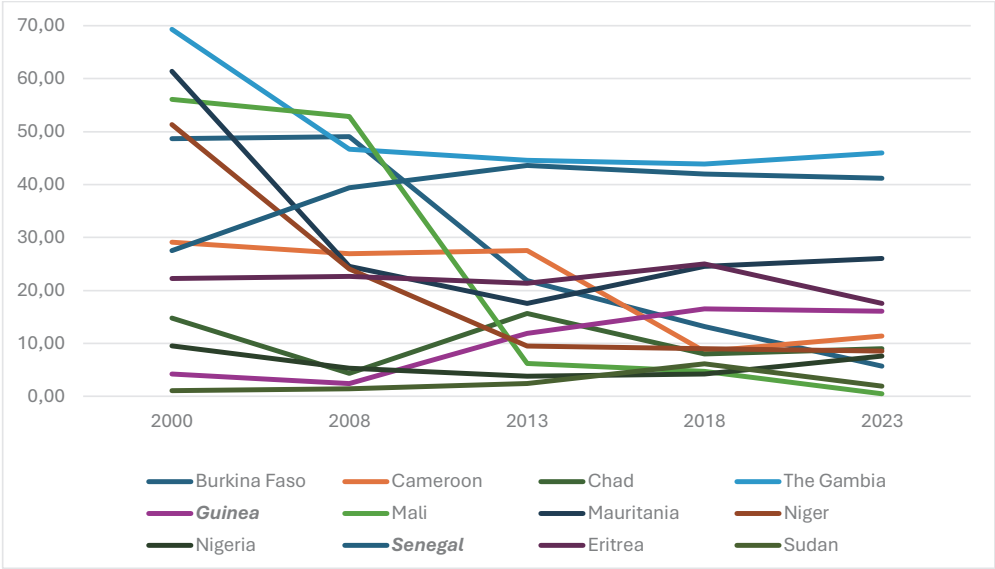


Figure 5 *Political stability and Absence of Violence/Terrorism* (World Bank Group, 2024)
[Author’s own graph]

Another one of the six Worldwide Governance Indicator components measures countries’ performance in the field of *Rule of Law*. All 10+2 barring Cameroon, Guinea and Sudan (in bold and Italic) have worse values for the year 2023 than for 2000 (see Figure 6 below).

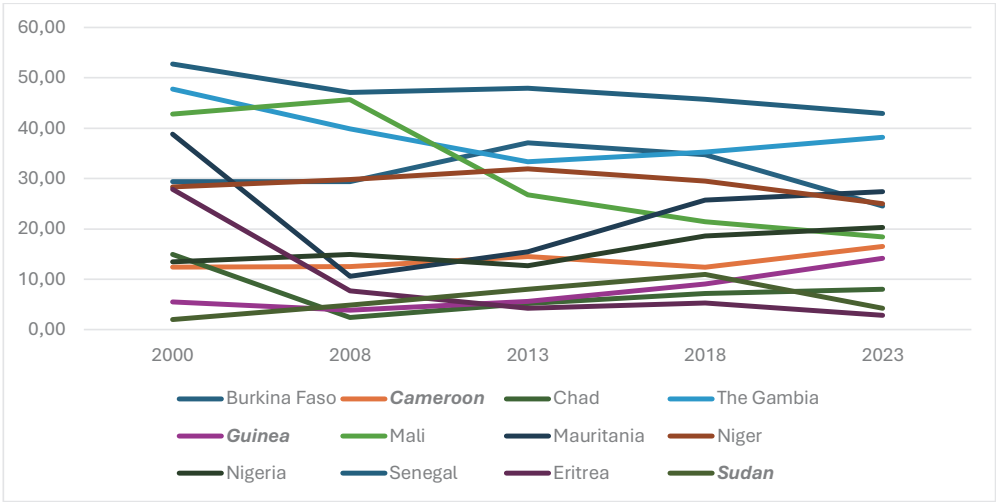


Figure 6 Rule of Law (World Bank Group, 2024) [Author's own graph]

The question of rule of law is closely tied together with one of the biggest challenges of most of the Third World Countries, corruption. The Corruption Perception Index (CPI) has been compiled since 1995 by Transparency International for a growing number of countries, however for our 10+2 countries 2012 was the first year to have data available for all the states (see Figure 7 below). Looking at the average of the twelve years in question, out of the 10+2 countries, three were in a better situation in 2023 (Cameroon, Transparency-b; The Gambia, Transparency-l; Sudan, (Transparency-k;), seven were stagnating (Burkina Faso, Transparency-a; Chad, Transparency-c; Guinea, Transparency-e; Mauritania, Transparency-g; Nigeria, Transparency-l; Senegal, Transparency-j; Eritrea, Transparency-d) and two got worse (Mali, Transparency-f; Niger, Transparency-h).

For the last available year 2023, out of the 180 countries, seven are in the worst 25%, namely Sudan and Chad 162nd, Eritrea 161st, Nigeria 145th, Guinea 141th, Cameroon 140th and Mali 136th (with none in the Top10).

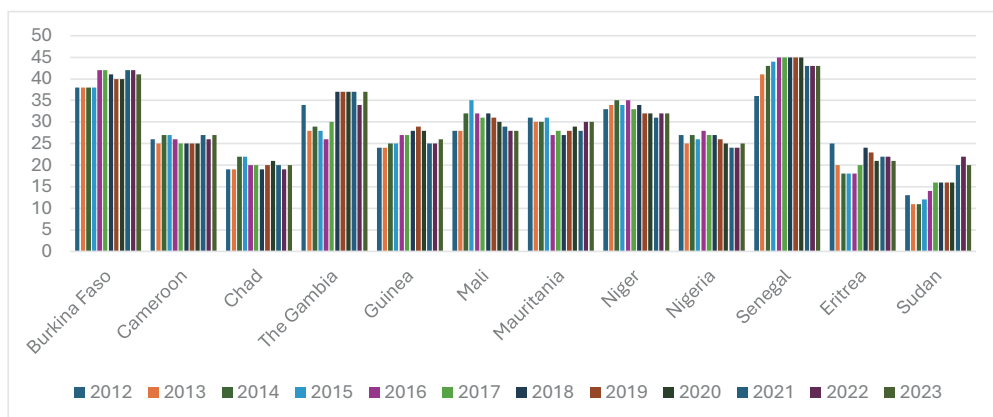


Figure 7 *Corruption Perception Index of Sahelian States (10+2) [Author's own graph]*

Sensing these weaknesses and others – especially economic and security – but wanting to solve issues on their own with their ‘fellow African states’ without necessarily involving other international actors, Sahelian countries have founded numerous regional international organisations (IOs). Besides the continental organisation, the African Union, these 10+2 countries established closer ties with one another through 17 regional organisations:

1. Conseil de l'Entente (CE, 1959) – Burkina Faso, Niger among 4 members³⁴;
2. Lake Chad Basin Commission (LCBC, 1964) – Cameroon, Chad, Niger, Nigeria, among 6³⁵;
3. Liptako-Gourma Integrated Development Authority (LGA, 1970) – Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger³⁶;
4. Mano River Union (MRU, 1973) – Guinea (1980) among 4³⁷;
5. Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS, 1975) – Burkina Faso (1975-2025), Guinea, Mali (1975-2025), (Mauritania 1975-2002), Niger (1975-2025), Nigeria, Senegal, The Gambia³⁸ among 12;
6. Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS, 1983) – Chad and Cameroon among 11³⁹;

³⁴ Official website: <http://conseildelentente.org>

³⁵ Official website: <https://cblt.org>

³⁶ Official website: <https://liptakogourma.org>

³⁷ Official website: <http://manoriverunion.int>

³⁸ Official website: <http://www.ecowas.int>

³⁹ Official website: <http://www.ceeac-eccas.org>

7. Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD, 1986) – Eritrea, Sudan among 8⁴⁰;
8. Union of Arab Maghreb (UMA, 1989) – Mauritania⁴¹ among 5;
9. Central African Economic and Monetary Community (CEMAC, 1994) – Cameroon and Chad among 6 (as a continuation of the Customs and Economic Union of Central Africa, UDEAC)⁴²;
10. Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA, 1994) – Eritrea, Sudan among 21⁴³;
11. West African Economic and Monetary Union (WAEMU, 1994) – Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, Senegal among 7⁴⁴;
12. Community of Sahel-Saharan States (CEN-SAD, 1998) – Burkina Faso (1998), Chad (1998), Mali (1998), Niger (1998), Sudan (1998), Eritrea (1999), The Gambia (2000), Senegal (2000), Nigeria (2001), Guinea (2007), Mauritania (2007) among 29⁴⁵;
13. Gulf of Guinea Commission (GGC, 2001) – Cameroon, Nigeria among 8⁴⁶;
14. Nouakchott Process (NP, 2013) – Burkina Faso, Chad, Guinea, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal among 11;
15. G5 Sahel (2014) – Burkina Faso (-2023), Chad, Mali (-2022), Mauritania, Niger (-2023)⁴⁷;
16. Accra Initiative (AI, 2017) – Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger among 7 (Eizenga & Gnanguênon);
17. Alliance of Sahel States (ASS, 2023) – Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger.

These organisations (see Figure 8 below) – in multiple cases with overlapping memberships – are usually underfinanced and overbureaucratized so their actual ability to fully function and to lay out detailed policies and implement them are extremely limited. As mentioned before, frequent coups are also hindering the efforts, slowing down or even halting the developments.

⁴⁰ Official website: <http://www.igad.org>

⁴¹ Official website: <http://www.maghrebarabe.org>

⁴² Official website: www.cemac.int

⁴³ Official website: <http://www.comesa.int>

⁴⁴ Official website: <https://www.uemoa.int>

⁴⁵ Official website: <http://www.cen-sad.org>

⁴⁶ Official website: <https://ecfr.eu/special/african-cooperation/gulf-of-guinea-commission/>

⁴⁷ Official website: <https://www.g5sahel.org>

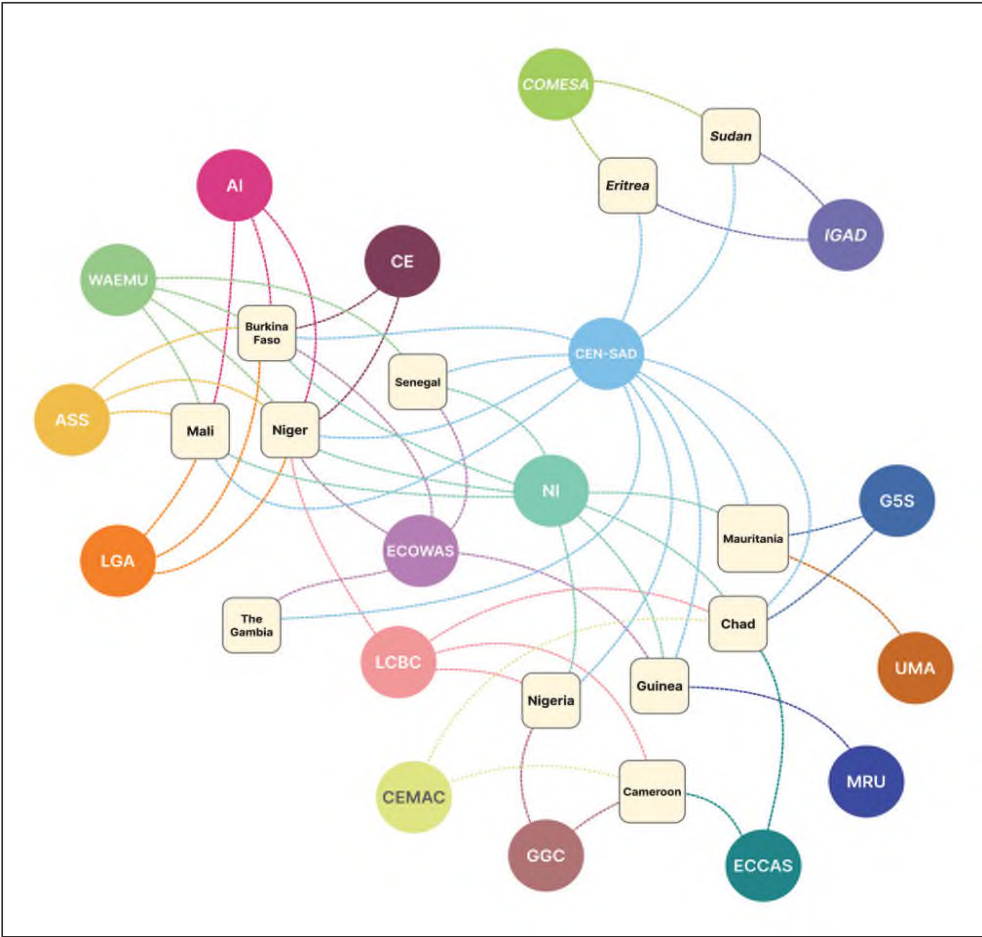


Figure 8 Memberships of Sahelian states (10+2) in regional international organisations

[Author's own graph made by Ngo Quoc Huy]

Though some of these organisations – such as the African Union or ECOWAS – do have mechanisms for safeguarding democratic values as well as law and order in their respective member states either in forms of sanctioning or suspending their members, lately these tools do not seem to work, and they have not only lost their strength in stopping events from happening but also the punishments given after the incidents had already occurred became irrelevant as was the case with Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, when they simply left the organisation – ECOWAS – that had started sanctioning them. Since the IOs do not mean too much in the development of their member states, or if they do, they are also considered foreign influence, these steps are in many ways harmless or hardly noticeable for the particular countries. In this case, the decisions made by these three countries were even stronger and more emblematic, since they launched their own regional organisation, in a way not just

highlighting that there is life outside of already existing structures but also creating another pole, offering a different alternative that can be a dangerous precedent for the regional status quo.

As the data shows, political stability and strong democratic institutions have never been generally widespread in the Sahel. Excluding short-term interim leaders, Mali has had only one president so far who left his position without being forced out of office (Tchioffo, 2020) and in case of Chad, none of the presidents were elected democratically or left office at the end of his term of their own will (Vogel, 2024b). There are other examples of similar situations in Mauritania and elsewhere. These, and most of the other coups, were welcomed by the citizens as they were supposed to bring the promised positive changes, however, they usually all failed to deliver and satisfy the aspirations of the population. In most of these countries, since colonial powers established militaries in order to suppress opposition and to secure their power, after gaining independence these security forces typically continued the 'tradition'. Taking into consideration that the military is usually a more organised (and generally more disciplined) group than the general population, it is in fact the only power with the ability to mobilize against a divided civil society. Upon changing approach and behaviour, military regimes tend to rapidly move from liberators to oppressors, then only to find themselves challenged (and in general, overthrown) by another group from within the military (Bensaid, 2019).

But these events never happen in a vacuum, independent and neutral from the outside world. The main figures in the latest series of the coups have all been trained by either France or the United States (Tchioffo, 2020). Additionally, for one reason or another, not all coups fall under the same category, as shown by the case of Chad: when President Idriss Déby Itno was killed in action in April 2021, his son, Mahamat Idriss Déby followed him as head of the Transitional Military Council, instead of Haroun Kabadi, President of the National Assembly, as directed in the Constitution and those who sanctioned Mali, Burkina Faso or Niger, did not act the same way in the de facto – though bloodless – military coup in Chad.

Besides usually causing even more political instability, these military regimes typically have a disastrous economic effect as well, both directly and indirectly. As the regimes make decisions by force and not necessarily based on data and calculations, they tend to turn to quick and easy money, which means that they would often abandon the traditional economy – agriculture – that would create income in the longer term as opposed to exporting natural resources, privatising national companies, and neglecting infrastructures that would make certain segments of economy less profitable.

Sahelian economies

Discussing economic aspects, a few pieces of information need to be mentioned for a better understanding. The Sahel region is in fact in a very advantageous situation: it is rich in natural resources, notably oil, natural gas, diamonds, gold, minerals and phosphates (see Figure 9 below). It also has some of Africa's largest aquifers, it has large water bodies such as Lake Chad and River Niger, and additionally, it has great potential in the field of renewable energy, especially solar energy.

Country	Natural resources among top 5 export commodities	Other natural resources	Notes
Burkina Faso	gold, zinc ore	manganese, limestone, marble, phosphates, pumice, salt	2 nd in zinc production in Africa.
Cameroon	crude petroleum, natural gas, gold	bauxite, iron ore, timber	
Chad	crude petroleum, gold	uranium, natron, kaolin, fish (Lake Chad), limestone, sand and gravel, salt	
The Gambia		fish, clay, silica sand, titanium (rutile and ilmenite), tin, zircon	
Guinea	gold, aluminum ore	iron ore, diamonds, uranium, hydropower, fish, salt	1 st largest exporter of aluminium ore and 1 st aluminium ore reserve, 1 st largest untapped iron ore reserves (20 bn mt).
Mali	gold	gold, phosphates, kaolin, salt, limestone, uranium, gypsum, granite, hydropower, note: bauxite, iron ore, manganese, tin, and copper deposits are known but not exploited	
Mauritania	gold, iron ore	iron ore, gypsum, copper, phosphate, diamonds, gold, oil, fish	
Niger	gold, uranium, thorium ore	coal, iron ore, tin, phosphates, molybdenum, gypsum, salt, refined petroleum	7 th uranium producer, also 7 th uranium reserve (311,100 tonnes U, 5%)
Nigeria	crude petroleum, natural gas, gold	natural gas, petroleum, tin, iron ore, coal, limestone, niobium, lead, zinc, arable land, refined petroleum	
Senegal	gold	fish, phosphates, iron ore, refined petroleum	
Eritrea	zinc ore, gold, copper ore	potash, salt, possibly oil and natural gas, fish	3 rd in zinc production in Africa.
Fmr. Sudan / Sudan	gold, crude petroleum	petroleum; small reserves of iron ore, copper, chromium ore, zinc, tungsten, mica, silver, gold; hydropower	

Figure 9 Natural resources of Sahelian states (10+2) (CIA-i, -d) [Author's own graph]

On the other hand, these advantages can easily become disadvantages for the countries of the region. As mentioned above, these natural resources can become the only export commodity, meaning that other parts of the economy are neglected and the income earned from these sources will be susceptible to demand and therefore

price changes on the international market, making the economy more fragile. In agriculture, conflicts of interest are likely to arise between farmers and livestock herder nomads, which is a great problem in a region where 64% of the population lives in rural areas (The Sahel Alliance, 2024). This sector of economy can also be impacted negatively by the effects of the climate change, and the oftentimes extreme irregularities – such as rainfalls, flash floods or droughts – can greatly influence the income generated by agriculture, as does a lack of or weak protection against diseases affecting livestock, locust swarms etc attacking the crops.

Opportunities for economies are also greatly influenced by the transportation infrastructure system of the countries. Find below Figure 10 with the most important data regarding these key elements.

Country	Area	Road network (paved/unpaved)	Railway network	Waterways	Coastline / Ports	Airports
Burkina Faso	274 200 km ²	15 304 km (3 642 km/11 662 km, 5.6 km/100 km ²)	622 km	0 km	Landlocked	49 (1/5 596 km ²)
Cameroon	475 440 km ²	77 589 km (5 133 km/72 456 km, 1.6 km/100 km ²)	987 km	350 km, partially, (River Benue) only in the rainy season	402 km / 7	37 (1/12 850 km ²)
Chad	1 284 000 km ²	40 000 km (25 000 km/15 000 km, 3.1 km/100 km ²)	0 km	12 400 km, partially (Chari (11 400 km) and Logone (1 000 km) rivers only in the rainy season)	Landlocked	42 (1/30 571 km ²)
The Gambia	11 300 km ²	2 977 km (518 km/2 459 km, 26.3 km/100 km ²)	0 km	390 km	80 km / 1	1 (1/11 300km ²)
Guinea	245 857 km ²	44 301 km (3 346 km/40 955 km, 18 km/100 km ²)	1086 km	1 300 km, partially (limited to shallow-draft boats only)	320 km / 4	16 (1/15 366 km ²)
Mali	1 240 192 km ²	139 107 km, (11.2 km/100 km ²)	593 km	app. 206 km, partially (River Niger), mostly in the rainy season	Landlocked	30 (1/41 340 km ²)

Mauritania	1 030 700 km ²	12 253 km (3 988 km/8 265 km, 1.2 km/100 km ²)	728 km	1 086 km, partially (Senegal River)	754 km / 2	25 (1/41 228 km ²)
Niger	1 267 000 km ²	18 949 km (3 979 km/14 969 km, 1.5 km/100 km ²)	0 km ⁴⁸	563 km, partially (River Niger), in the rainy season	Landlocked	26 (1/48 730 km ²)
Nigeria	923 768 km ²	195 000 km (60 000 km/135 000 km, 21.1 km/100 km ²)	3 798 km	8 600 km (Niger and Benue Rivers)	853 km / 28	47 (1/19 655 km ²)
Senegal	196 722 km ²	16 665 km (6 126 km/10 539 km, 8.5 km/100 km ²)	906 km	1 000 km (primarily on the rivers Senegal, Saloum, and Casamance)	531 km / 6	19 (1/10 354 km ²)
Eritrea	117 600 km ²	16 000 km (1 600 km/14 400 km, 13.6 km/100 km ²)	306 km	0 km	2 234 km ⁴⁹ / 2	10 (1/11760 km ²)
Sudan	1 861 484 km ²	30 000 km (8 000 km/22 000 km, 1.6 km/100 km ²)	7 251 km	4 068 km, partially (1 723 km all year long on the White and Blue Nile Rivers)	853 km / 4	41 (1/45 402 km ²)

Figure 10 *Transportation infrastructure (CIA-q, -o, -s, -b, -n, -a) [Author's own graph]*

This mostly poor infrastructure has occasionally gone through some sort of extension and upgrade mostly in order to satisfy the needs of the export. The two charts below (Figure 11 and 12) summarize the export and the import of the Sahelian 10+2, showing the overall volume and the Top3 partners in both categories.⁵⁰

The colour codes of the boxes represent whether the former colonial power and the United States (cold colours) or China (in red) is in stronger position, showing a strong shift towards the latter from around the 2010s.

⁴⁸ The Niamey - Dosso (Benin) line (140km) was finished in 2016, but not in operational condition, it is unused. Sieczkowski, D. (2024, March 11). *Railways in Niger*. Trenopedia. <https://trenopedia.com/railways-in-niger>

⁴⁹ Mainland on Red Sea 1 151 km, islands in Red Sea 1 083 km.

⁵⁰ The chart is using the 2-letter countrycodes except for the UN category of Areas NES (ANES) and Other Europe NES (OENES), 'NES' meaning not elsewhere specified. United Nations. (n.d.). *UN Comtrade Analytics - Trade Dashboard*. United Nations. <https://comtrade.un.org/labs/data-explorer/>

FR in Top3 without CN	UK in Top3 without CN	IT in Top3 without CN	US in Top3 without the former colonial power	CN in Top3 without the former colonial power	US in stronger position against CN
FR in stronger position but CN in Top3	UK in stronger position but CN in Top3	IT in stronger position but CN in Top3	US in stronger position but former colonial power in Top3	CN in stronger position but former colonial power in Top3	CN in stronger position against US

However, the unfavourable conditions mentioned above are not the only challenges the economies of Sahelian countries need to tackle. Additional financial burdens also exist in the form of the ever-increasing defence budgets (growing especially at the expense of public service spending, such as healthcare or education), and the share of public debt (sharply increasing since 2011, averaging more than 50 percent in 2023).

Country	Total IMF credit outstanding as of 31/12/2024	Total disbursements	Total repayments	Total IMF credit outstanding as of 10/01/2025
Burkina Faso	330 200 000	0	1 806 000	328 394 000
Cameroon	1 116 420 000	0	12 420 000	1 104 000 000
Chad	483 046 000	0	6 309 000	476 737 000
The Gambia	118 745 000	0	1 166 250	117 578 750
Guinea	338 284 300	0	1 721 300	336 563 000
Mali	329 787 600	0	0	329 787 600
Mauritania	304 940 000	0	0	304 940 000
Niger	387 233 000	0	3 384 000	383 849 000
Nigeria	613 625 000	0	0	613 625 000
Senegal	1 094 807 500	0	0	1 094 807 500
Eritrea	0	0	0	0
Sudan	991 551 000	0	0	991 551 000

Figure 13 *Total IMF credit in the Sahel (IMF, 2025) [Author’s own graph]*

Although in the medium-term economic growth is estimated to reach 4.7 percent which is significantly more than the world average (Selassie & Kramarenko, 2023), it is still not enough for the region to catch up with developed countries: according to the IMF, to make this happen an additional \$28.3 billion USD investment would have been required during the period 2023-26 (IMF Policy Papers, 2022). This amount of money, of course would only reach the desired state if the previously mentioned corruption was mitigated, with an enhanced governance including more transparency and more accountability, as well as with the execution of strategically planned decisions ensuring efficiency, sustainability, and fostering resilience (Selassie & Kramarenko, 2023).

Additionally, two more areas require the attention of Sahelian governments, inflation and unemployment. The latter does not concern all the countries of the region right now (see Figure 14 below), however, the greatly increasing population means that more and more people will enter the labour force looking for jobs to earn a living.

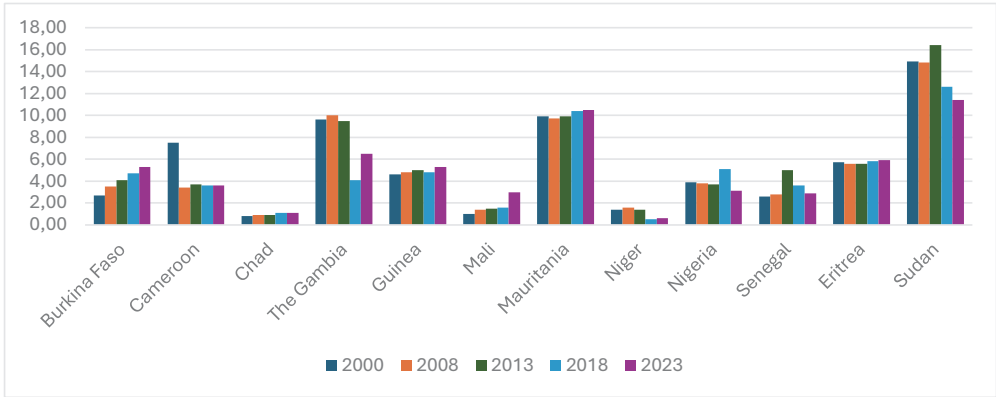


Figure 14 *Unemployment in the Sahel (World Bank-h) [Author's own graph]*

The issue of inflation (see Figure 15 below) is more unique in case of the Sahel. Six of the observed countries are using currencies pegged to the Euro. The Central African CFA franc (XAF) has been used by Cameroon and Chad (as well as the Central African Republic, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon and the Republic of the Congo), while Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger and Senegal have been using the West African CFA franc (XOF), as well as Benin, Guinea-Bissau, Côte d'Ivoire and Togo) since their creation in 1945. For more than seven decades, CFA brought stability to the CFA-countries – but also meant limitations as 50 percent of their reserves were stored in the French Treasury – but this system ended for the West African CFA community with the planned introduction of the ECO in 2027, with no reserves stored in France and no French representative on the currency union's board.⁵¹

⁵¹ The evolution of the currency could be best illustrated by the fact that the abbreviation 'CFA' originally stood for "French Colonies in Africa" (Colonies Francaises d'Afrique), then was changed to . It now stands for "African Financial Community" (Communaute Financiere Africaine) which was modified into "Financial Cooperation in Central Africa" (Cooperation Financiere en Afrique Centrale). Aboa, A. (2019, December 21). *West Africa renames CFA franc but keeps it pegged to euro*. reuters.com. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ivorycoast-france-macron/west-africa-renames-cfa-franc-but-keeps-it-pegged-to-euro-idUSKBN1YP0JR/>

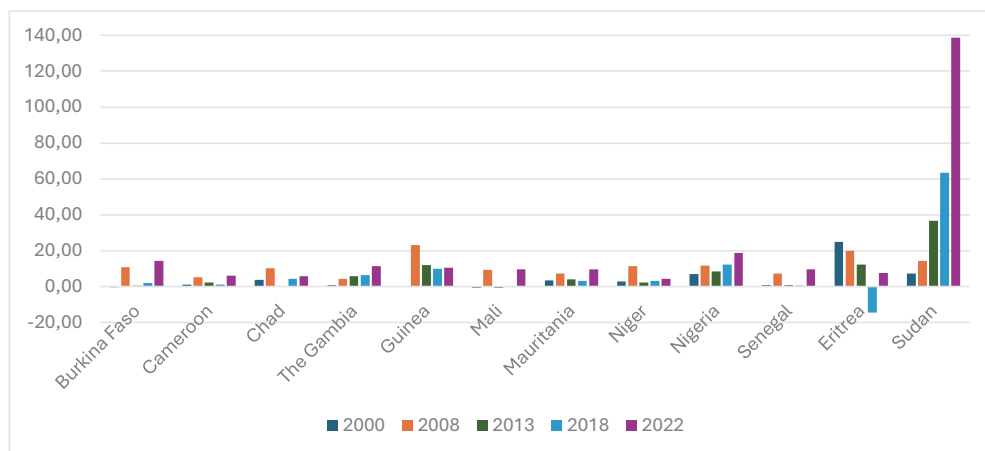


Figure 15 *Inflation in the Sahel (World Bank-b) [Author's own graph]*

The societal sector

Although conditions are not quite favourable, the Sahel region is home to around one fourth of the African population that can be grouped into around 1,200 (1,700 in case of the 10+2 countries) ethnic groups, 77 percent of them being of Muslim faith and 19 percent Christian (76 percent and 20 percent for the 10+2 states respectively, see Figure 16 for further details). Regarding this highly multi-ethnic landscape, we also need to mention that the governability of these countries is challenging not only because the composition of the population, but in several cases because the same ethnic group often lives on both sides of a border with frequent interactions amongst themselves, getting involved in the neighbouring country as well.

Country	Number of ethnic groups	Ethnic groups	Religious groups
Burkina Faso	66	Mossi 53.7%, Fulani (Peuhl) 6.8%, Gurunsi 5.9%, Bissa 5.4%, Gurma 5.2%, Bobo 3.4%, Senufo 2.2%, Bissa 1.5%, Lobi 1.5%, Tuareg/Bella 0.1%, other 12.8%, foreign 0.7% (2021 est.)	Muslim 63.8%, Roman Catholic 20.1%, Animiste 9%, Protestant 6.2%, other 0.2%, none 0.7% (2019 est.)
Cameroon	250+	Bamileke-Bamu 22.2%, Biu-Mandara 16.4%, Arab-Choa/Hausa/Kanuri 13.5%, Beti/Bassa, Mbam 13.1%, Grassfields 9.9%, Adamawa-Ubangi, 9.8%, Cotier/Ngoe/Oroko 4.6%, Southwestern Bantu 4.3%,	Roman Catholic 33.1%, Muslim 30.6%, Protestant 27.1% other Christian 6.1%, animist

		Kako/Meka 2.3%, foreign/other ethnic group 3.8% (2022 est.)	1.3%, other 0.7%, none 1.2% (2022 est.)
Chad	200+	Sara (Ngambaye/Sara/Madjingaye/Mbaye) 30.5%, Kanembu/Bornu/Buduma 9.8%, Arab 9.7%, Wadai/Maba/Masalit/Mimi 7%, Gorane 5.8%, Masa/Musseye/Musgum 4.9%, Bulala/Medogo/Kuka 3.7%, Marba/Lele/Mesme 3.5%, Mundang 2.7%, Bidiyo/Migaama/Kenga/Dangleat 2.5%, Dadjo/Kibet/Muro 2.4%, Tupuri/Kera 2%, Gabri/Kabalaye/Nanchere/Somrai 2%, Fulani/Fulbe/Bodore 1.8%, Karo/Zime/Peve 1.3%, Baguirmi/Barma 1.2%, Zaghawa/Bideyat/Kobe 1.1%, Tama/Assongori/Mararit 1.1%, Mesmedje/Massalat/Kadjakse 0.8%, other 4.6%, unspecified 1.7% (2014-15 est.)	Muslim 52.1%, Protestant 23.9%, Roman Catholic 20%, animist 0.3%, other Christian 0.2%, none 2.8%, unspecified 0.7% (2014-15 est.)
The Gambia	9 major recognised by the government	Mandinka/Jahanka 33.3%, Fulani/Tukulur/Lorobo 18.2%, Wolof 12.9%, Jola/Karoninka 11%, Serahuleh 7.2%, Serer 3.5%, other 4%, non-Gambian 9.9% (2019-20 est.)	Muslim 96.4%, Christian 3.5%, other or none 0.1% (2019-20 est.)
Guinea	24+	Fulani (Peuhl) 33.4%, Malinke 29.4%, Susu 21.2%, Guerze 7.8%, Kissi 6.2%, Toma 1.6%, other/foreign 0.4% (2018 est.)	Muslim 85.2%, Christian 13.4%, animist 0.2%, none 1.2% (2018 est.)
Mali (Sharma, 2022)	20	Bambara 33.3%, Fulani (Peuhl) 13.3%, Sarakole/Soninke/Marka 9.8%, Senufo/Manianka 9.6%, Malinke 8.8%, Dogon 8.7%, Sonrai 5.9%, Bobo 2.1%, Tuareg/Bella 1.7%, other Malian 6%, from members of Economic Community of West Africa 0.4%, other 0.3% (2018 est.)	Muslim 93.9%, Christian 2.8%, animist 0.7%, none 2.5% (2018 est.)
Mauritania	6-9, government does not recognise smaller ethnic groups	Black Moors (Haratines - Arabic-speaking descendants of African origin who are or were enslaved by White Moors) 40%, White Moors (of Arab-Amazigh descent, known as Beydane) 30%, Sub-Saharan Mauritaniens (non-Arabic speaking, largely resident in or originating from the Senegal River Valley, including Halpulaar, Fulani, Soninke, Wolof, and Bambara ethnic groups) 30%	Muslim (official) 100%

Niger	200+	Hausa 53.1%, Zarma/Songhai 21.2%, Tuareg 11%, Fulani (Peuhl) 6.5%, Kanuri 5.9%, Gurma 0.8%, Arab 0.4%, Tubu 0.4%, other/unavailable 0.9% (2006 est.)	Muslim 95.5%, ethnic religionist 4.1%, Christian 0.3%, agnostics and other 0.1% (2020 est.)
Nigeria	371	Hausa 30%, Yoruba 15.5%, Igbo (Ibo) 15.2%, Fulani 6%, Tiv 2.4%, Kanuri/Beriberi 2.4%, Ibibio 1.8%, Ijaw/Izoni 1.8%, other 24.9% (2018 est.)	Muslim 53.5%, Roman Catholic 10.6%, other Christian 35.3%, other 0.6% (2018 est.)
Senegal	36+	Wolof 39.7%, Pulaar 27.5%, Sereer 16%, Mandinka 4.9%, Jola 4.2%, Soninke 2.4%, other 5.4% (includes Europeans and persons of Lebanese descent) (2019 est.)	Muslim 97.2% (most adhere to one of the four main Sufi brotherhoods), Christian 2.7% (mostly Roman Catholic) (2019 est.)
Eritrea	9	Tigrinya 50%, Tigre 30%, Saho 4%, Afar 4%, Kunama 4%, Bilen 3%, Hedareb/Beja 2%, Nara 2%, Rashaida 1% (2021 est.)	Muslim (predominantly Sunni) 52%, Christian 47% (predominantly Eritrean Orthodox
Sudan	500+	Sudanese Arab (approximately 70%), Fur, Beja, Nuba, Ingessana, Uduk, Fallata, Masalit, Dajo, Gimir, Tunjur, Berti	Muslim 91% (predominantly Sunni), Christian 5.4%, Indigenous religions 2.8%

Figure 16 Ethnic and religious composition of the Sahel (10+2) (CIA-c, -p) [Author's own graph]

(green: Majority ethnic / religious group exists (50%+), yellow: at least one ethnic group between 33.3%-50%, red: no ethnic group reaching one third of the population (<33.3%))

Challenges in the social sector are at least as colourful as the ethnic landscape of the region, as the entire lifecycle of the population, the field of healthcare, education as well as living circumstances all discussed here. Due to the limitations of this chapter, not all aspects can be analysed in detail but some of the most representative indicators are collected in the chart below (see Figure 17).

Country	Population (PAX)	Population growth rate (%)	Median age (year)	Life expectancy (year)	Net migration rate (%)	Urban population (%)	Infant mortality (Per 1 000 deaths)	Physician density (per 1 000 PAX)	Literacy (%)
Burkina Faso	23 042 199	2.40	18.70	64.20	-0.60	32.50	47.00	0.09	46.00
Cameroon	30 966 105	2.71	18.90	64.20	-0.3	59.30	46.10	0.13	77.10
Chad	19 093 595	3.01	16.70	60.00	-0.1	24.40	62.50	0.06	26.80
The Gambia	2 523 327	2.16	20.20	68.40	0.0	64.50	35.70	0.08	58.10
Guinea	13 986 179	2.74	19.40	64.60	0.0	38.10	47.00	0.23	45.30
Mali	21 990 607	2.90	16.40	63.20	-2.9	46.20	57.40	0.13	35.50
Mauritania	4 328 040	1.92	22.10	65.90	-0.7	57.70	48.90	0.19	67.00
Niger	26 342 784	3.66	15.20	60.90	-0.6	17.10	64.30	0.04	37.30
Nigeria	236 747 130	2.52	19.30	62.20	-0.2	54.30	53.70	0.38	62.00
Senegal	18 847 519	2.46	19.20	70.60	-0.7	49.60	31.10	0.09	56.30
Eritrea	6 343 956	1.12	21.30	67.50	-8.7	43.40	39.80	0.08	76.60
Sudan	50 467 278	2.55	19.30	67.80	-1.6	36.30	40.60	0.26	60.70

Figure 17 Some relevant social indicators for the Sahel region (10+2) (CIA-m, -l, -h, -f, -j, -r, -e, -k, -g) - (green: value among Top10 in the world, red: value among the last 10 in the world) [Author's own graph]

Only by looking at the colours of the chart, it is clearly visible that the region has one of the highest growth rates by population (with the potential to double in 25 years), which – especially coupled with some of the worst numbers for life expectancy – mean a low median age on average. These and the other numbers show that healthcare and education are gravely underfinanced. Out of the region Chad, Mali and Niger stand out with some of the world's worst records in the given categories.

Despite all these, there are some positive indicators that need to be mentioned as well: since the 1990s, the UN Human Development Index has risen sharply in the region, by a yearly average of 1.9 percent (three times higher than the global average) (Osman, 2021) Extreme poverty rate has fallen as well, though still representing a serious challenge for the region (see Figure 18 below for more wealth-related indicators).

Country	Poverty headcount ratio at \$2.15 a day (2017 PPP) (%)	Prevalence of undernourishment (%)	People using at least basic drinking water services (%)	Access to electricity (%)
Burkina Faso	25,3 (2021)	15	50 (2022)	19,5
Cameroon	23 (2021)	6	70 (2022)	71,0
Chad	30,8 (2022)	35	52 (2022)	11,7
The Gambia	17, 2 (2020)	21	86 (2022)	65,4
Guinea	13,8 (2018)	10	71 (2022)	47,7
Mali	20,8 (2021)	10	84 (2022)	53,0
Mauritania	5,4 (2019)	9	78 (2022)	49,0
Niger	50,6 (2021)	13	49 (2022)	19,5
Nigeria	30,9 (2018)	18	80 (2022)	60,5
Senegal	9,9 (2021)	5	86 (2022)	67,9
Eritrea	n/a	n/a	52 (2016)	55,4
Sudan	15,3 (2014)	11	65 (2016)	63,2

Figure 18 Some relevant social indicators for the Sahel region regarding financial status (10+2) (red: value among the last 10 in the world) (World Bank-f, -g, -d, -i) [Author's own graph]

Environmental issues

An often overlooked factor by politicians and policymakers is the environmental sector, which also plays an enormous – and growing – role in security. The Sahel, being a hot semi-arid region has been facing a growing number of challenges, including desertification, salinization, soil erosion, over-cultivation and over-grazing.

The signs of climate change can already be seen, but studies indicate that the temperature will continue to increase, and extreme weather conditions will be more frequent, hitting the Sahel region harder than other parts of the world (Norman, 2002). Regarding temperature, heatwaves are becoming longer and hotter, with West African temperature increasing by 1-3°C since the mid-1970s, and according to studies this will not stop. The average annual temperature of the Sahel is expected to increase by 3-5°C – approximately double the global average – by 2050.

Cyclical periods of rainfall are typical for the region, but on top of that this part of the world has experienced the most significant change in this regard in the world over the same period (Toulmin, 2020). This change usually takes the form of sudden heavy rainfalls causing severe flash floods, and also changes in the timing and the length of the rainy season generally, making it shorter than previously. In the Western Sahel it is estimated that the wet season will be 4-6 days shorter in the future. The opposite end of drastic rainfalls are droughts that have also left their mark on the region, most emblematically in the shrinking of Lake Chad (Benjaminsen & Hiernaux, 2019).

These trends are especially worrisome if we consider the fact that only around 5 percent of the land is irrigated, and more extreme droughts can also increase seasonal migration, especially for herders (Tesfaye, 2022).

Country	ND-GAIN Country Index ⁵²		Risk of desertification
	Rank	Score	
Burkina Faso	162	38,0	42%
Cameroon	155	38,7	n/a
Chad	187	27,2	30%
The Gambia	151	39,8	n/a
Guinea	154	38,8	n/a
Mali	180	34,2	38%
Mauritania	157	38,6	38%
Niger	176	35,5	42%
Nigeria	152	39,4	n/a
Senegal	144	40,9	10%
Eritrea	185	30,6	26%
Sudan	183	32,7	23%

Figure 19 Some relevant environmental indicators (Norman, 2002) [Author’s own graph]

⁵² The ND-GAIN Country Index summarizes a country's vulnerability to climate change and other global challenges in combination with its readiness to improve resilience. *ND-GAIN Country Index*. Notre Dame Global Adaptation Initiative. (n.d.). <https://gain.nd.edu/our-work/country-index/rankings/>

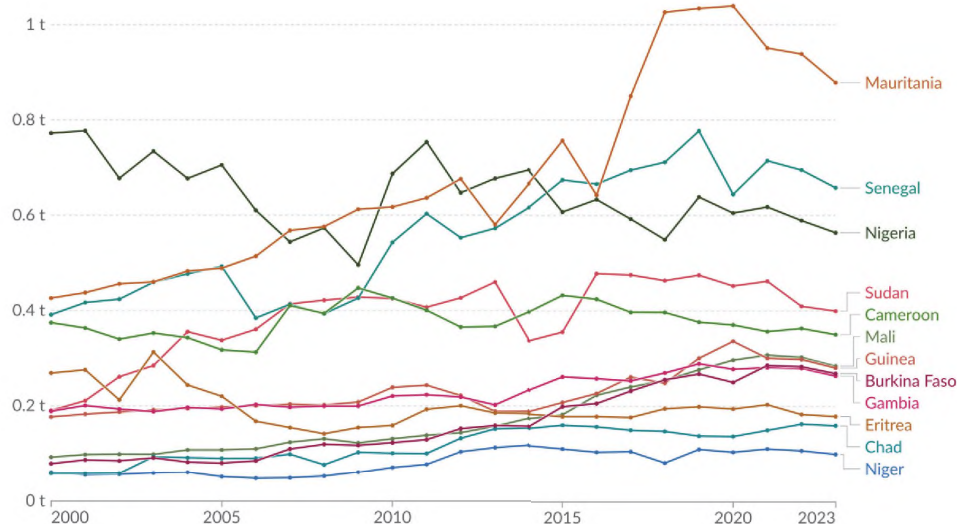


Figure 20 Per capita CO₂ emissions from fossil fuels and industry, land-use change excluded (Our World in Data) [Author's own graph]

The military sector

Since defence and security issues are dealt with in other chapters, this chapter will only examine relevant indicators of the field of defence as collected in the chart below (see Figure 21).

When discussing about the Sahel, one of the very first topics to come up is always security and the ongoing armed conflicts of the region: civil wars, the increasing activities of terrorist organisations; and growing tensions between herders and farmers, as well as between ethnic groups for various reasons. bearing this in mind, it is interesting to see in the chart below that data does not fully support the idea that the region is 'over-militarized' and showing the characteristics of a warzone. Military expenditure is increasing in only five of the countries (and likely in war-torn Sudan, noting that Burkina Faso, Chad, Guinea, and Mali with more significant increases are all countries with a recent military coup). The number of people in arms (active Armed Forces or paramilitary) are not any higher compared to the overall population than elsewhere in the world. The number of foreign troops, especially in peacekeeping missions could also be an indicator, though the reason for the disappearance of these international military actors is more political than defence-related. On the other hand, the overall situation is not as good as some of these data would suggest, as the last column containing the major terrorist organisations active in the Sahelian states is

empty only in three cases. Number of terrorist activities, casualties, etc – which will be analysed in other chapters – would further darken this picture.

NGA	0,51	0,43	143 000 80 000	0,24	0.5619 (A:4th, W:39th)	UK: 80	UK: 50	MINUSCA 5 MONUSCO 9 ECOWAS/E COMIG 200 Guinea- Bissau 86 UNIFIL 2 UNMISS 13 UNISFA 176 MINURSO 6	Boko Haram; Islamic State of Iraq and ash-Sham – West Africa; Jama'atu Ansarul Muslimina Fi Biladis-Sudan (Ansaru)
SEN	1,45	1,77	13 600 5 000	0,10	2.9117 (A:30th, W:130th)	France: 350 Spain (Op. Barkhane): 65		MINUSCA 192 MONUSCO 7 ECOWAS/E COMIG 250 ECOWAS ESSMGB 150 UNMISS 1	Jama'at Nusrat al- Islam wal- Muslimin (JNIM)
ERI	n/a	n/a	301 750 0	2,57	2.4152 (A:23th, W:117th)		UAE: (Op. Restoring Hope): 1 000	Ethiopia: 40 000	
SDN	n/a	n/a	104 300 60 000	0,06	1.4119 (A:10th, W:76th)	UNISFA: 3 043	UNAMID: 7 823 UNISFA: 4 419	Yemen 650	Islamic State of Iraq and ash- Sham (ISIS); al- Qa'ida; Harakat Sawa'd Misr

Country	Military expenditure 2023 (% of GDP)	Military expenditure 2018 (% of GDP)	Number of personnel Active Armed Forces / Paramilitary	Number of trained armed personnel / km ²	Power Index	Number of Foreign Troops 2023	Number of Foreign Troops 2018	Forces deployed abroad 2023	Terrorist groups
BFA	4,01	2,16	7 000 4 450	0,04	2.8501 (Africa: 29th, World: 127th)	0	France (Op. Barkhane): 250	MINUSCA 4 MONUSCO 5	Ansarul Islam; Islamic State of Iraq and ash-Sham in the Greater Sahara (ISIS-GS); al-Mulathamun Battalion (al- Mourabitoun); Jama'at Nusrat al- Islam wal- Muslimin (JNIM)
	0,61	1,11	25 400 9 000	0,07	2.0599 (A:19th, W:104th)	0	USA: 300	MINUSCA 760 MONUSCO 4	Boko Haram; Islamic State of Iraq and ash-Sham – West Africa
CMR	2,79	1,61	33 250 11 900	0,04	1.8607 (A:14th, W:93rd)	Benin: 150 (MNJTF) France: 1 500	Benin (MNJTF) 150 France: 1 500	MINURSO 1	Boko Haram; Islamic State of Iraq and ash-Sham - West Africa (ISIS-WA)
TCD	0,58	n/a	4 100 0	0,35	n/a	Ghana (ECOMIG): 50 Nigeria (ECOMIG): 200 Senegal (ECOMIG): 250	Ghana: 50 (ECOMIG) Nigeria: 200 (ECOMIG) Senegal: 250 (ECOMIG)	MINUSCA 9 MONUSCO 2 UNMISS 3	
GMB	2,16	1,52	9 700 2 600	0,05	n/a	0	0	UNMISS 3 UNISFA 1 MINURSO 5	
GIN	5,11	4,08	21 000 20 000	0,03	2.115 (A:20th, W:106th)	EUTM: 256	MINUSMA: 12 112 EUTM: 626 Op. Barkhane: 1 890	MONUSCO 4	Ansar al-Dine; Islamic State of Iraq and ash-Sham in the Greater Sahara (ISIS-GS); Jama'at Nusrat al- Islam wal- Muslimin (JNIM); al-Mulathamun Battalion (al- Mourabitoun)
MLI	2,35	3,04	15 800 5 000	0,02	2.9277 (A:31st, W:131st)	0	0	MINUSCA 465 UNSOS 1 UNISFA 3	Al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)
MRT	1,96	2,34	39 100 48 000	0,07	2.7282 (A:25th, W:121st)	USA: 1 100	France (Op. Barkhane): 500 Germany: 2 Italy (MISIN):70 USA: 800	MINUSCA 6 MONUSCO 5	Boko Haram; Islamic State of Iraq and ash-Sham in the Greater Sahara (ISIS-GS); Islamic State of Iraq and ash-Sham – West Africa (ISIS-WA); Jama'at Nusrat al- Islam wal- Muslimin (JNIM); al-Mulathamun Battalion (al- Mourabitoun)
NER									

Figure 21 Selected data for the defence sector (Military Balance 2019-a, -b, 2024-a, -b)
[Author's n graph]

Conclusion

Although the limitations of this chapter could not allow an in depth multisectoral analysis of the entire Sahel region, the original aim was to compile data and highlight the key security issues and root causes of the greatest challenges and this has been achieved.

The international community, starting with the United Nations, through subregional African organizations, and including the North Atlantic Treaty Organization as well, use their own, and often self-contradicting terminology for the Sahel. NATO itself uses different sets of countries from time to time. As several factors such as the population, ethnic groups, geographical features the security situation, climate issues and in some cases even history link these above mentioned twelve countries together that are sharing the same or very similar challenges, NATO should come up with its own Sahel terminology for the dozen countries that link north and central Africa.

As shown, all sectors of security off challenges or even pose threats for the Sahelian states. But, on the other hand, some of the data sets indicate that there is great potentials in the region. However, since there is some sort of order of importance for these sectors, if one is not 'in order' and at least meeting minimum criteria, development regarding the others cannot possibly follow. Political turmoil, a suddenly changing political landscape (with or without coups), oppressed (armed) opposition are not new to most of the countries of the region. Quite obviously. in an unstable environment with no significant domestic or foreign investment will be carried out. Natural resources might be taken generating some revenue but without any added value, meaning possibly a higher income for the country. Missing out in this field means fewer financial opportunities for social programs, for improvements in health care or education, etc. not to mention environmental issues (which are usually at the bottom of the list, if at all). One exception to this rule might exist, the military (defence) sector. In an unstable political situation, military spendings can skyrocket and the armed forces can flourish, especially if the power is in the hands of those wearing a uniform and even more so, if they need to use the military to keep the power. Therefore, programs and efforts on all levels, both international or regional, aiming to bring political stability should be pursued to make sustainable solutions feasible for the region.

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PART III: REGIONAL SECURITY CHALLENGES

CHAPTER 13

Coups, Fragility and Instability in the Sahel: Rethinking State Weakness and Military Rule

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Abstract

Since the early 1950s, Africa has experienced hundreds of successful, failed and attempted military coups d'état. While this phenomenon has long attracted scholarly attention, recent events in the Sahel have sparked renewed debate, particularly with the emergence of what has been termed a 'coup contagion'. This chapter examines the relationship between state fragility and military coups in four Sahelian countries: Mali, Niger, Sudan and Burkina Faso. Drawing on data from the Fund for Peace's Fragile States Index and the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED) Conflict Index, it explores how escalating terrorist violence and the proliferation of armed groups have undermined regional stability. Additional factors – including ethnic nationalism, economic inequality, and civil unrest – further compound this fragility. Using a qualitative research approach, the chapter offers insights into the conditions that sustain state weakness in the Sahel and their connection to the recurrence of military coups.

Keywords: Africa, governance, military coups, religiously extremist groups, Sahel, state fragility

Introduction

The intersection of political instability, socio-economic decline, terrorism, and violent extremism has further weakened fragile states in Africa—most notably in the Sahel, where numerous successful, failed, and attempted military coups have occurred. While Africa has long been characterised as a 'coup trap' (Collier & Hoeffler, 2005), the Sahel is increasingly referred to as the continent's 'coup belt' (Chigozie &

Oyinmiebi, 2022). More recently, the region has also been identified as a hotspot for ‘coup contagion’, wherein the occurrence of a military coup in one country heightens the likelihood of similar events in neighbouring states, especially those already marked by fragility and weak governance.

This chapter considers state fragility in the Sahel region through the lens of coups in four countries where successful military takeovers occurred between 2020 and 2023. Our analysis focuses on countries that have previously experienced episodes of political unrest or military involvement in politics, exploring the interplay of internal and external factors that contribute to state fragility. We trace the historical trajectories of military coups in Mali, Niger, Sudan and Burkina Faso, highlighting variations in the conditions that facilitate such events. Drawing on data from select indices, we conclude that while some countries have seen improvements in certain indicators even shortly after the coups, others with stronger pre-coup scores have nonetheless experienced military takeovers. These patterns underscore the need to reassess the role of these indicators and their relationship to the environments that either foster or inhibit the likelihood of coups.

This chapter employs a qualitative approach to examine military coups and state fragility in the Sahel. It draws on primary and secondary sources, including the Fund for Peace’s Fragile States Index, the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED) Conflict Index, scholarly literature, official reports, and media coverage. The chapter is structured in several parts. Following the introduction, we provide a brief overview of historical and emerging trends in coups within the Sahel, situating the study within the existing literature. We then proceed to analyse the four country cases, building on our overview. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the findings, final remarks, and directions for future research.

The Sahel: A crucible of coups and state fragility

Sub-Saharan Africa has a long history of military coups, beginning in the 1960s. On January 13, 1963, a gunman shot and killed Togo’s first president, Sylvanus Olympio, outside the US Embassy in Lomé. This event marked both the first successful military overthrow in Sub-Saharan Africa and the first instance of a leader being assassinated during a coup (Decalo, 1973; Akinola & Makombe, 2024). African leaders widely condemned the coup. Gnassingbé Eyadéma, who assumed power following Olympio’s death, remained in office until 2005, becoming Africa’s longest-serving leader.

Following the events in Togo, Nigeria experienced a violent military coup on January 15, 1966, led by Major General Nzeogwu and a group of young UK-trained army officers, which ended the country’s democratic government. Shortly thereafter, on February 24, 1966, Ghana underwent a coup that ousted Kwame Nkrumah and installed Joseph A. Ankrah as the nation’s first military head of state (Bennett, 1973).

These incidents represent just a few of the numerous successful and failed military coups that have taken place across Africa over the decades—events that continue to shape the continent's political landscape more than 60 years later.

The academic literature examining and reflecting on state instability, political and socioeconomic inequities and failures, terrorism and violent extremism, climate, and coups d'état in and related to Africa spans decades and multiple fields (see Fossum, 1967; Clapham, 1968; Collier, 1978; Higget & Fuglestad, 1974; O'Kane, 1981; Johnson, 1983; McGowan, 1984, 2003; David, 1987; Onwumechili, 1998; Collier & Hoeffler, 2005; Powell, 2011; Souaré, 2014, 2024; Powell et al., 2016; Omorogbe, 2021; Ero & Mutiga, 2024; Opalo, 2024; Wilén, 2024).

Johnson et al. (1983) built on the theoretical understanding of military coups in Africa by first replicating Jackman's (1978) model for identifying structural determinants of coups, especially in Sub-Saharan Black Africa. They use the model to account for 91% of the variation in military coups across 35 Black African states from 1960 to 1982. They find that fewer military coups, attempted coups, and coup plots are observed in Black African states whose economies are relatively dynamic but whose societies were not very socially mobilised prior to their independence from colonial rule. These states also either maintained or restored at least some degree of participation and pluralism in the political domain.

McGowen (2003: 339) examines both successful and failed coup attempts in Sub-Saharan Africa, (SSA) arguing that military-led political instability “adversely affect economic growth and human development in SSA, and is a major cause of the current African crisis.” He finds that:

“Military interventions have continued to be pervasive in Africa, despite democratisation trends since 1990; that *coups*, failed *coups* and *coup* plots form a syndrome of military-led PI; that colonial heritage is unrelated to *coup* activity; that the chance of success when launching a *coup* attempt has averaged more than 40% since 1958; that once a successful *coup* has occurred, military factionalism often leads to more *coup* behaviour; that except for a declining rate of success once a *coup* is undertaken, there is no major difference between 1956–79 and 1980–2001; that no trends of increasing or decreasing *coup* behaviour are evident, except that up to around 1975 as decolonisation progressed, TMIS also increased; and that West Africa is the predominant centre of *coup* activity in SSA, although all African regions have experienced *coups*. States that have been free of significant PI since 1990 are examined and those with institutionalised democratic traditions appear less prone to *coups*.”

Akinola’s (2024: n.p.) assessment of the resurgence of military coups in Africa explores whether military coups in Africa signify a democratic reversal for the continent; he writes that irrespective of the promise of democracy, the majority of African countries have failed to reach a level of political development that goes beyond “what has become the ‘ritualistic’ conduct of elections and political transitions.”

Souaré (2024) investigated patterns of military coups in post-colonial Africa, looking at the trends and occurrences of military coups in a time series beginning in 1952 with the case of Egypt until Burkina Faso’s coup in September 2022. The author assesses coups from the perspective of the coup plotters and staggers to account for why they are orchestrated by middle-ranking officers compared to those led by top-level officers and commanders in other countries and regions. The research also considers whether military juntas pursue or do not pursue the re-establishment of democratic or constitutional order.

The studies above contribute to a continuously expanding corpus of scholarship on the occurrence of military and constitutional coups, drawing on a diversity of theoretical, methodological, and empirical research approaches and literatures. The growth of scholarship has been fuelled by what United Nations (UN) Secretary-General António Guterres has dubbed an “epidemic of coups d’état” across Africa. This purported resurgence of government overthrows was marked by the August 2020 Mali coup, which was quickly followed by a series of military takeovers elsewhere in the region.

To further illuminate these dynamics, the following section turns to specific cases of military coups in the Sahel, examining how institutional weaknesses, socio-economic pressures, and external interventions converge to shape patterns of state fragility.

Region	Successful	Failed	Attempted
Global	247	245	492
Africa	109	111	220
Latin America	76	70	146
East Asia	22	27	49
Middle East	23	21	44
Europe	9	8	17
South Asia	6	10	16

Table 1. Number of successful, failed, and attempted coups by region

Source: Compiled by authors.

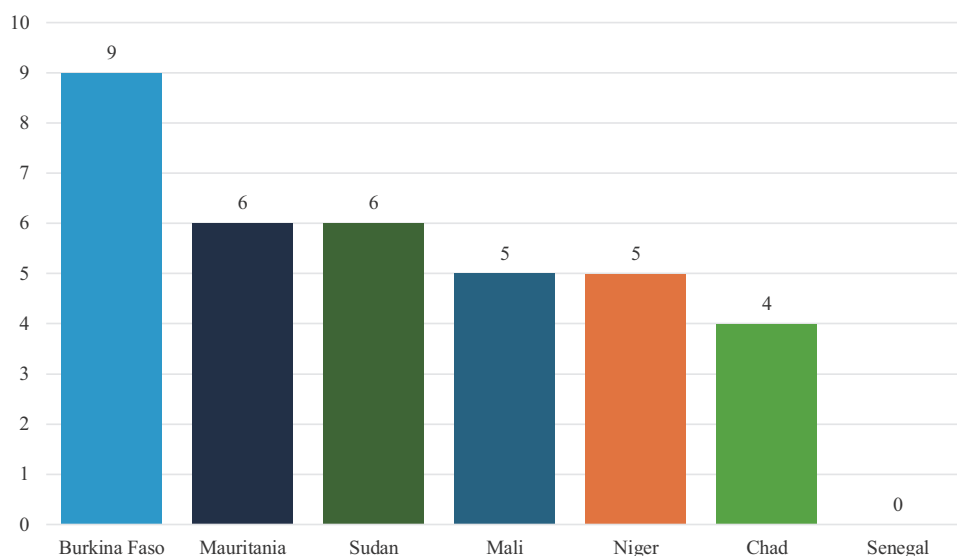


Figure 1. No. of successful military coups in select Sahel states, 1960–2024

Source: Compiled by authors.

Country	No. of successful coups	Date of successful coup
Burkina Faso	9	30 September 23, 2022; January 23–24, 2022; October 2014; October 15, 1987; August 4, 1983; November 7, 1982; November 25, 1980; February 8, 1974; January 3, 1966
Mauritania	6	August 6, 2008; August 2, 2005; December 12, 1984; January 4, 1980; July 12, 1979; July 10, 1978
Sudan	6	October 25, 2021; April 11, 2019; June 30, 1989; April 6, 1985; May 26, 1969; November 17, 1958
Mali	5	May 24, 2021; August 18, 2020; March 21, 2012; March 26, 1991; November 19, 1968
Niger	5	July 26–28, 2023; February 18, 2010; April 9, 1999; January 27, 1996; July 15, 1974

Chad	4	April 11 to May 9, 2021; December 3, 1990; June 7, 1982; April 13, 1975
Senegal	0	Since independence in 1960, Senegal has never experienced a successful military coup, thanks to its strong democratic culture and professional military. The only major challenge came in 1962, when Prime Minister Mamadou Dia was accused of plotting a coup, but this was a political dispute rather than a military takeover. More recently, in 2024, the postponement of elections sparked accusations of a 'constitutional coup', though the crisis was resolved with peaceful, democratic polls. Overall, Senegal remains one of West Africa's most stable democracies, with no credible record of attempted coups.

Table 2. Select Sahel states where successful coups have been staged

Source: Compiled by authors.

Country	Level
Sudan	Extreme
Burkina Faso	High
Mali	High
Chad	Turbulent
Niger	Turbulent
Senegal	Low/inactive
Mauritania	Low/inactive

Table 3. ACLED Conflict Index Rankings of select states

Source: Compiled by authors using data from ACLED (2025).

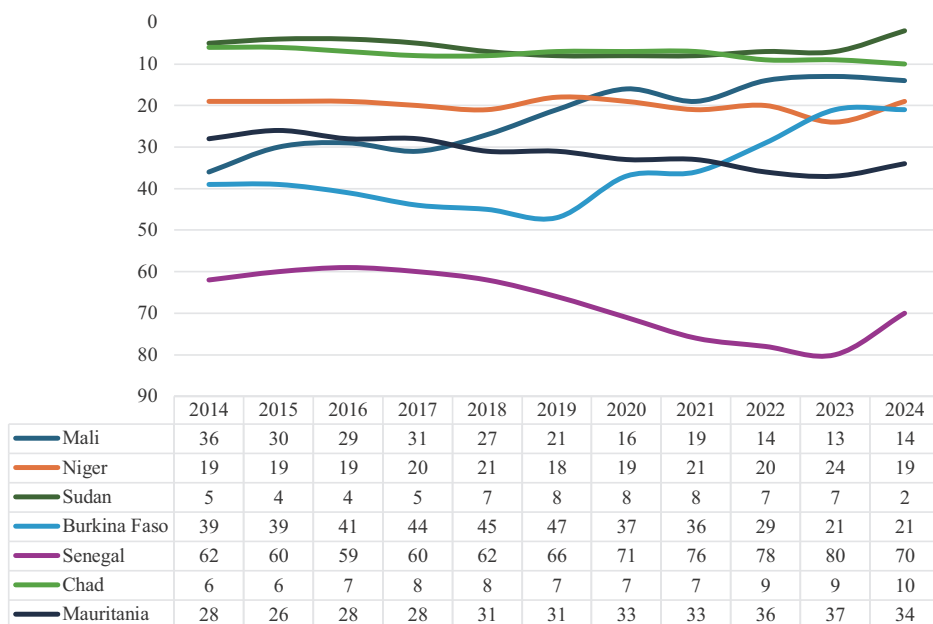


Figure 2. Fragile States Index ranking of Sahelian states, 2014 to 2024

Source: Compiled by authors using data from the Fragile States Index (2025).

*A higher value denotes a greater degree of fragility.

Africa's 'coup belt': Military coups and state fragility in the Sahel

Mali's coup cycle: From Traoré to the contemporary junta

Lieutenant Moussa Traoré led a bloodless coup nearly 60 years ago on November 19, 1968, when his group formed a 14-member Military Committee for National Liberation (CMLN) (The African Executive, 2005). Traoré's leadership emerged approximately a decade after the nation achieved independence, during a period of significant internal turmoil. He orchestrated his reform efforts amid debilitating internal struggles, including rebellions and severe drought. Military rule never left the country despite the creation of a new constitution in 1974 and a one-party state that sought to move the country to civilian governance. Over time, the route to multi-party democracy saw the establishment of autonomous political associations, an independent press, and a quasi-opening of the system, as well as rising discontent with the country's transition and progress. Traoré's regime argued that Mali was unprepared for democracy.

Mali's more than two decades of military rule and over half a century of post-colonial transition have been marked by intense political turmoil and repeated military coups. Four Tuareg rebellions and several failed peace agreements between the north and south occurred in Mali between 1960 and 2012. Even after these accords, some

argued that the Malian government was neglecting the north (Bekoe, 2012), failing to provide essential public services and resources, which created opportunities for religiously extremist groups to exploit communities abandoned by the state (Paradela-López & Jima-González, 2024). Mali reached a peace deal with Tuareg rebels in June 2015, which the junta dissolved in late January 2024; nonetheless, the peace agreement did not address the country's predominance of violence caused by active militant organisations beyond the Tuareg (UN, 2015).

In July 2018, former President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta received 1,331,132 votes (41.7%) (Mumbere, 2018). However, claims of electoral fraud against him triggered large protests, which were exacerbated by the popular belief that the government lacked the power to control the growth of violence by religious extremist organisations. The ongoing violence and the government's attempts to quell it prepared the groundwork for heinous human rights violations, particularly by Malian military troops and security personnel. On August 18, 2020, Colonel Assimi Goïta staged a military coup that toppled Keïta. Both the president and the prime minister were detained, and the constitution was suspended. Following criticism by the international community, Mali was the target of financial and economic sanctions by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) (UN, 2022).

The former Mali defence minister, Bah Ndaw, assumed office as interim president. After the coup, Goïta served as vice president of the transitional administration. Its primary objective was to convene fresh elections throughout the nation. However, the duration of the interim administration was brief. On May 24, 2021, Goïta staged a second coup during which he detained Ndaw and Prime Minister Moctar Ouane (Al Jazeera, 2021). Goïta and his supporters argued that the transitional administration failed to fulfil its obligations and that free and fair elections were impossible without the participation of all political parties in the governing process. Goïta declared himself as president of the transitional government, establishing military rule over the country. Elections were promised for early 2024; however, these again did not take place as planned. During this time, violence escalated, and deaths resulting from religiously extremist groups, ethnic conflicts, and government measures to suppress revolts rose dramatically.

2025 marks the fifth year since the Malian military junta took power. Throughout this period, the political landscape and atmosphere of Mali have been dominated by military governance, with the military's influence in politics growing. This military expansion, as well as the breakdown of military-civil lines, exacerbated the country's rapidly rising fragility. This, along with security worries beyond Mali's borders, unresolved economic issues, and an increasingly unstable political system, all contributed to the country's spiral of instability. The international community has undertaken sanctions and diplomatic initiatives to reinstate civilian authority, but so far

these measures have failed. In late 2024, Prime Minister Choguel Kokalla Maïga and his government were ‘terminated’ because of the broken pledges and unclear plans for the transition back to civilian power. In November 2024, Maïga expressed concerns about the government’s lack of transparency: “The transition was supposed to end on 26 March 2024, but it has been postponed indefinitely, unilaterally, without debate within the government” (TRT Afrika, 2024). General Abdoulaye Ma’ga, who is unrelated to Choguel Ma’ga, succeeded him, indicating a strengthening of military authority.

Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger formally withdrew from ECOWAS on January 29, 2025, citing ongoing tensions and their reluctance to heed ECOWAS’ pleas for the three countries to re-establish diplomatic administration. It seems improbable that they will return to Africa’s most influential and largest economic bloc in the near future, especially given that the three countries have established their bloc, the Alliance of Sahel States (Alliance des États du Sahel [AEC]), which was established on September 16, 2023, after Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger signed the Liptako-Gourma Charter (Modern Diplomacy, 2025). All three countries were given a six-month grace period to rejoin after ECOWAS officially authorised their exit on December 15, 2024 (THISDAY, 2024).

Over the last five years, the junta in Mali has proven repeatedly that it is not serious about transferring power to civilians. On the ground, Mali’s political framework has deeply ingrained the junta’s military rule. Furthermore, the junta’s leadership has resulted in an escalation in militant violence. In 2020 and 2021, 3,539 people died in Mali, whereas 6,690 died in 2022 and 2023.

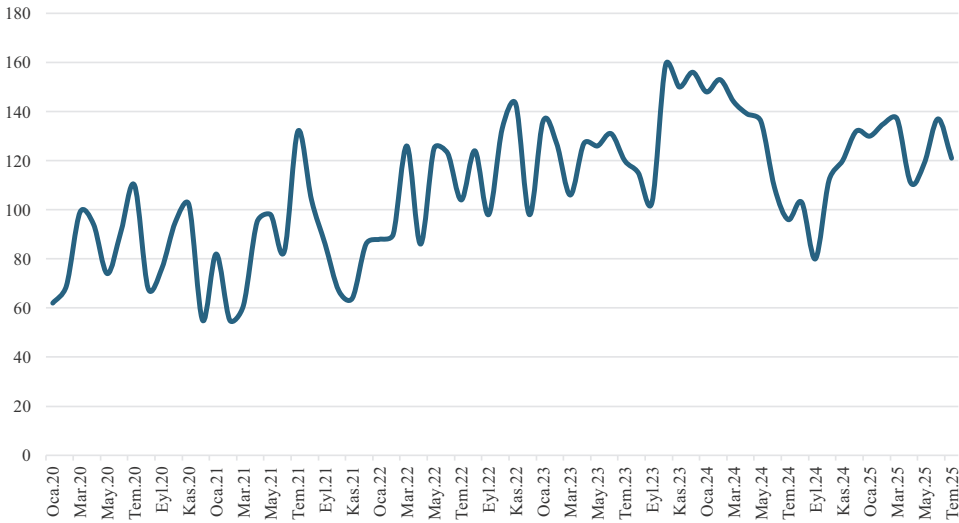


Figure 3. All event types in Mali (battles, explosions/remote violence/violence against civilians), January 2020 to June 2025

Source: ACLED (2025).

*Data for January to June 2025 represent forecasted events.

Year/month	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	TOTAL
2025	130	135	137	111	119	137	121	125	125	122	122	123	890
2024	148	153	144	139	136	109	96	103	80	112	120	132	1472
2023	136	127	106	127	126	131	120	115	103	159	150	156	1556
2022	88	90	126	86	125	123	104	124	98	133	143	98	1338
2021	82	55	61	95	98	83	132	104	86	67	64	86	1013
2020	62	69	99	94	74	91	110	68	76	95	102	55	995

Table 4. All event types in Mali (battles, explosions/remote violence/violence against civilians), January 2020 to December 2025

Source: ACLED (2025).

*Data for August to December 2025 represent forecasted events.

**Total for 2025 does not include forecasted events.

Year	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Rank	36th	30th	29th	31st	27th	21st	16th	19th	14th	13th	14th
Total	89.8	92.9	95.2	92.9	93.6	94.5	96.0	96.6	98.6	99.5	97.3
Security apparatus	8.0	8.7	9.2	9.0	9.3	9.5	9.5	9.6	9.7	9.6	9.7
Fractionalised elites	4.9	4.9	5.2	4.9	5.4	5.4	5.7	6.2	7.2	7.2	7.6
Group grievance	7.5	7.6	7.9	7.4	7.9	8.1	8.4	8.1	8.2	8.5	8.2
Economy	7.9	8.2	7.9	7.7	7.6	7.4	7.3	7.5	7.2	7.5	7.0
Economic inequality	7.1	7.4	7.6	7.4	7.3	7.0	7.0	7.2	7.3	7.2	6.9
Human flight and brain drain	8.1	8.4	8.7	8.5	8.6	8.3	8.0	7.9	7.8	7.7	7.4
State legitimacy	5.9	6.0	6.3	6.1	6.1	6.5	7.0	7.5	8.5	8.6	8.7
Public services	8.6	9.0	9.0	8.8	8.5	8.5	8.8	9.1	8.9	8.9	8.9
Human rights	6.8	6.7	7.0	7.3	7.3	7.6	7.7	7.4	7.2	7.5	8.3
Demographic pressures	9.0	9.1	8.7	8.5	8.0	8.3	8.6	8.7	8.8	8.8	9.6
Refugees and IDPs	7.5	7.8	8.1	7.9	8.2	8.4	8.4	8.1	8.4	8.5	6.1
External intervention	8.5	9.3	9.6	9.4	9.5	8.6	9.6	9.3	9.4	9.5	5.3

Table 5. Fragile States Index—Mali

Source: Fragile States Index (2025).

From independence to junta: Niger's struggle with fragile governance

Foreign influence and interference have been ongoing in Niger since its declaration of independence from France on August 3, 1960. Such interference has frequently been highlighted as one of the key reasons for the country's fragility, rather than alleviating the conditions that have contributed to Niger's political and socioeconomic difficulties and general instability. The former colonialists were deeply involved in Niger's politics and had a key influence in economic and resource exploitation that continues to this day. For example, France has been exploiting Niger's uranium reserves since the colonial period, maintaining significant control over production and export, which has fuelled ongoing debates about sovereignty and economic dependency (Makonye & Maramba, 2024).

More than 65 years after gaining independence, Niger remains one of the world's poorest countries with an unstable security situation, owing considerably to the immense resource extraction from the country by its former colonial master. This has left decades-long scars, manifesting in economic disparity and a flat economy. The impacts have varied across the country, with certain groups being disadvantaged more than others. The geographic location of those groupings and communities has also influenced this outcome. As a result, the lack of economic opportunities has driven some individuals to resort to desperate measures. Terrorism and violent extremism, for example, have proven to be appealing means of creating alternative livelihoods. Furthermore, economic deprivation, combined with the negative effects of climate change and governance gaps across the country, exacerbated the population's anger.

Niger's complicated political landscape, which includes severe poverty, societal instability, decreased fish stocks, habitat degradation and the depletion of numerous natural resources, has resulted in five successful military coups. The fifth successful military coup in the country's history since independence, which occurred in 2023 and was the first since the military junta under Salou Djibo (2010–2011), resulted in the establishment of the country's current leader, General Abdourahamane Tchiani, a former presidential guard commander who declared himself the head of Niger's new military government after deposing President Mohamed Bazoum in July 2023 (Adekaiyaoja, 2023; Radio France Internationale, 2023).

President Mahamadou Issoufou was re-elected in the 2015 presidential election despite concerns about the integrity of the process and opposition anger. Opposition parties expressed anger, while the general public perceived him as a leader who was indifferent about the country. Many Nigeriens saw him as a reckless leader who ignored several crises affecting the nation at large. Several years before the elections, tens of thousands of people marched through the streets of Niamey to protest his authority, accusing him and his administration of extreme corruption and media repression.

Along with ignoring the country's basic problems, his administration was castigated for its inept handling of the insurgency, with some of the most dangerous religiously extremist groups at the heart of Niger's terrorism and insurgency landscape—Jama'a Nusrat ul-I wa al-M (JNIM), DAESH, and Boko Haram. The most recent coup cited deteriorating security conditions as justification. Extremist organisations took advantage of governance weaknesses that occurred not only in Niger but also in Mali and Burkina Faso, establishing their presence and conducting operations in rural areas and the countryside that were beyond the reach of the government. These events fuelled even more public frustrations and hostility towards the administration. The convergence of public grievances over these issues, as well as regime corruption in a country with widespread poverty, massive food insecurity, and deteriorating education and health systems, has contributed to Niger's low scores on the state fragility index remaining consistent across all 12 indicators, with only minor improvements in some areas from year to year. Niger's total score rose five places in 2023, but, in 2024, the country's ranking remained unchanged from 2014.

Days before Mohamed Bazoum took office as Issoufou's successor, an attempted coup took place in July 2021. Although the coup was unsuccessful and resulted in arrests, it showed many people's mounting discontent with the government's handling of the country's social issues. Then, on July 26, 2023, a military coup involving multiple factions of the armed forces took power and suspended the constitution. The democratically elected President Mohamed Bazoum was jailed, and General Abdourahamane Tchiani declared himself the leader of Niger's new military administration. The coup leaders, known as the 'National Council for the Safeguard of the Homeland' (CNSP), justified their seizure of power by citing the country's insecurity and economic concerns.

Regional actors, especially ECOWAS, and various international agencies threatened sanctions. Countries in the West, especially the US and France, were quick to denounce the CNSP's coup and subsequent dissolution of the democratically elected government. They attributed the growing instability in Niger and the region to the coup, rather than its history of colonial exploitation, sanctions, and foreign interference. Even though the country's political atmosphere has remained tense and unpredictable, the coup leaders have maintained control of the government since the military takeover. Niger's deep-seated problems remain unresolved, even with the deployment of French and American troops, over €500 million from the EU to improve governance and sustainable development, and the 2023 launch of the EU's €27 million military training mission (EUMPM Niger).

Niger's challenges have been similar to those of its surrounding neighbours, with the country afflicted by weak governance, areas devoid of government presence and security guarantees, poor and non-existent infrastructure, and a lack of basic provisions for the population. Although governmental legitimacy has increased in the

short period following the coup, public services in the country have remained continuously poor. External intervention, including economic sanctions, is unlikely to be effective. Demuyne and Böhm (2023: n.p.) argue that such methods could “exacerbate grievances among local populations, thereby garnering further support for the military rulers, or serve as useful recruitment tools for violent extremist groups trying to position themselves as alternative governance actors”.

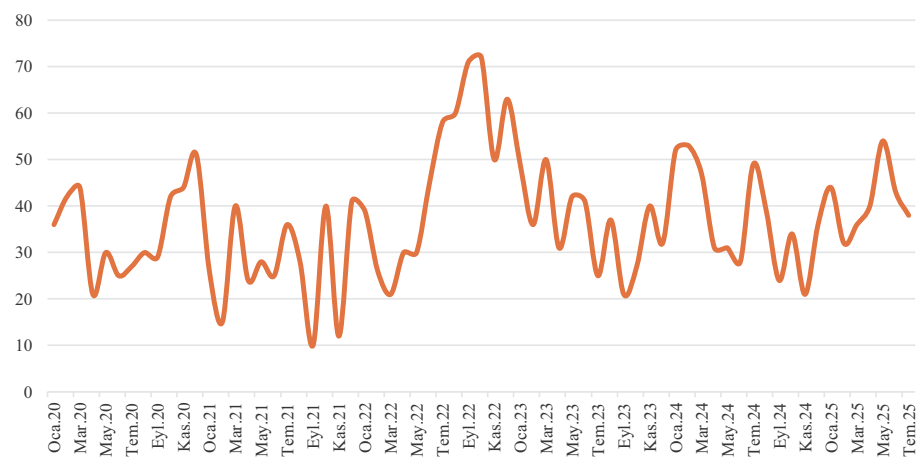


Figure 4. All event types in Niger (battles, explosions/remote violence/violence against civilians), January 2020 to June 2025

Source: ACLED (2025).

*Data for January to June 2025 represent forecasted events.

Year/month	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	TOTAL
2025	44	32	36	40	54	43	38	41	38	39	39	38	287
2024	52	53	47	31	31	28	49	39	24	34	21	36	445
2023	49	36	50	31	42	41	25	37	21	27	40	32	431
2022	39	26	21	30	30	45	58	60	71	72	50	63	565
2021	26	15	40	24	28	25	36	28	10	40	12	41	325
2020	36	42	44	21	30	25	27	30	29	42	44	51	421

Table 6. All event types in Niger (battles, explosions/remote violence/violence against civilians), January 2020 to December 2025

Source: ACLED (2025).

*Data for August to December 2025 represent forecasted events.

**Total for 2025 does not include forecasted events.

Year	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Rank	19th	19th	19th	20th	21st	18th	19th	21st	20th	24th	19th
Total	97.9	97.8	98.4	97.4	96.2	96.2	95.3	96.0	95.2	93.4	95.2
Security apparatus	8.4	8.7	8.9	8.7	8.4	8.7	8.8	8.9	8.6	8.3	9.0
Fractionalised elites	8.9	8.9	8.9	8.9	8.9	8.9	8.9	9.3	9.6	9.6	9.9
Group grievance	7.5	7.5	7.7	8.0	7.7	7.7	7.8	7.5	7.6	7.7	7.4
Economy	8.1	8.2	8.0	7.5	7.3	7.1	6.8	6.8	6.5	6.4	7.0
Economic inequality	7.9	8.4	8.2	8.5	8.2	8.0	7.7	7.8	7.9	7.8	7.7
Human flight and brain drain	6.6	6.9	7.2	7.5	7.6	7.6	7.3	7.0	6.9	6.6	6.3
State legitimacy	7.8	7.5	7.8	7.3	7.0	7.3	7.0	7.1	6.8	6.6	6.7
Public services	9.3	9.3	9.2	9.5	9.4	9.3	9.2	9.7	9.6	9.5	9.6
Human rights	7.3	6.8	6.7	6.5	6.8	6.8	6.9	7.1	7.0	6.7	6.8
Demographic pressures	9.3	9.6	9.5	9.0	9.1	8.8	8.7	8.8	8.8	8.9	8.8
Refugees and IDPs	8.2	7.9	8.0	7.9	8.0	8.3	8.4	8.5	8.2	7.9	8.0
External intervention	8.6	8.1	8.3	8.1	7.8	7.8	7.8	7.5	7.7	7.4	8.0

Table 7. Fragile States Index—Niger

Source: Fragile States Index (2025).

Sudan's post-independence political turbulence

Since its independence in 1955, Sudan has seen six military coups. General Ibrahim Abboud launched the first successful and bloodless coup against the coalition government of the time. The next decades saw 35 more coups, with successful ones orchestrated in 1969, 1985, 1989, 2019, and the most recent in October 2021 (Watson, 2021). The most recent coup threw the country into war.

Sudan's civil conflict has a long history, dating back more than three decades before the current turmoil. Former soldier Omar Hassan Ahmad al-Bashir took power in the country in 1989 by toppling the elected government, but he was forced to quit in 2019 following massive protests and a coup against him. His oppressive administration established the groundwork for many years of conflict. He faced numerous allegations of crimes against humanity, war crimes, and involvement in the Darfur conflict. Al-Bashir backed the Janjaweed militia group that arose in the 1980s as a result of Khartoum's crisis and which was fuelled by marginalisation and poor drought management that led to famine, the outbreak of civil war, rising migrant flows from Chad, rebel activities from Chad and Libya, and a failure to resolve inter-ethnic tensions (Besenyő 2019).

They were the masterminds of the 2003 Darfur crimes against humanity. During his counter-insurgency initiatives against government opposition groups in Darfur, his forces carried out countless illegal attacks and systematic acts of pillage on communities, as well as murder and extermination campaigns against the same groups. In addition to his campaigns that involved forcible movement and transfer, torture and rape, he was also responsible for the contamination of water sources and supplies (ICC, 2021). The African Union Mission in Sudan (AMIS), which was succeeded by the United Nations-African Union Mission in Darfur (UNAMID) in December 2007, was one example of negative external intervention. Although they did bring about a few minor changes, they were ultimately unsuccessful (Besenyő, 2021).

The infamous and feared Janjaweed paramilitary force was rebranded as the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) in 2013, and ex-Janjaweed member Mohammed Hamdan Dagalo (often referred to as 'Hemedti') was appointed leader. The organisation stuck with its violent tactics. Following the October 25, 2021, coup, the country was governed by a military council led by two military officers: General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan of the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and General Dagalo, deputy and chief of the RSF. The army seized Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok and dissolved the Transitional Sovereignty Council (TSC) and cabinet. A state of emergency was declared.

Al-Burhan backed the use of military forces, claiming that it would restore peace and security in the face of continued violence, political schisms, and street protests. The current crisis arose from a disagreement between the two regarding the country's future direction and proposals for civilian administration and governance. General

Dagalo has led a formidable military force with expertise in neighbouring countries, including Libya and Yemen.

Protests against President Omar al-Bashir's extended authority began in 2018, and they radically changed Sudan's political dynamics. What began as demonstrations against rising food costs and economic hardship grew into a full-fledged movement calling for the regime's downfall. After months of unrest, Sudan's military deposed and imprisoned Bashir in April 2019. Jubilant protestors hailed the move across the country, but it soon became clear that the military had other ideas. Following Bashir's ouster, military and civilian officials reached an agreement on power-sharing, resulting in the Transitional Sovereignty Council, which was supposed to be a step towards democracy. The power-sharing agreement was expected to pave the way for democratic elections after the transitional arrangements.

Misperceptions and mistrust have also contributed to the current conflict and humanitarian crisis, resulting in numerous civilian deaths. Wealth and power aspirations were important drivers of suspicion, while al-Burhan saw the presence of a formidable military force outside of the legitimate government as a challenge to his authority. These suspicions and the ensuing responses resulted in open violence between the two factions on April 15, 2023, that has carried on for more than two years (Africa Confidential, 2025). Fighting between the two groups swiftly intensified and spread throughout the country. Over the course of several months, discussions for returning power to civilians failed. The RSF seized the strategically important city of Wad Madani in December 2023, causing waves of civilians to flee, adding to the intensification of internal displacement and cross-border migrations (Duwaji, 2025). As witnessed in other countries, the irregular and large movement of many people, particularly vulnerable persons such as women and children, has been perceived as an opportunity for exploitation by a variety of parties ranging from opposing governmental forces and power competitors to paramilitary and extremist groups.

The conflict has compelled hundreds of thousands to abandon their homes. Consequently, the massive exodus has presented new challenges for the country and its neighbours. The conflict has escalated human rights violations, such as sexual atrocities, looting, and indiscriminate killings, leading to an increase in grievances. The violence and war have been intensified by the interference of other powers, including Libya, Chad, South Sudan, Iran, and (allegedly) the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

Sudan's chronic violence has grown more heated recently, and 2025 has brought new waves of violent attacks, exacerbating the country's inherent challenges such as food and water insecurity, governance woes, and foreign actors' concerns about the best way forward in addressing the country's internal situation and its implications for the wider Sahel region. Recurrent violence has resulted in rising human rights violations, public dissatisfaction, and greater rifts across groups. The

persistence of displacements within the country is a key issue that interrelates to all the others.

Despite assurances that the administration will work towards a solution for the country based on the transition to a civilian government, these promises have not been realised. Popular trust in these pledges has collapsed, and people generally dislike a government in which the military plays an active role and remains one of the main culprits of conflict. Dissent among the populace is also motivated by the historical misdeeds of the rebranded RSF and SAF which have transformed the country into a massive battleground. The conversion of the state to a platform for conflict has severely harmed infrastructure, exacerbated economic inequality, ruined hopes for economic development for the population, and aggravated the situation of refugees and Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs). The war is more than just a fight for democracy. A military-civilian power struggle results from the conflict's intertwining with the country's citizens' usual political, social, and economic constraints and problems.

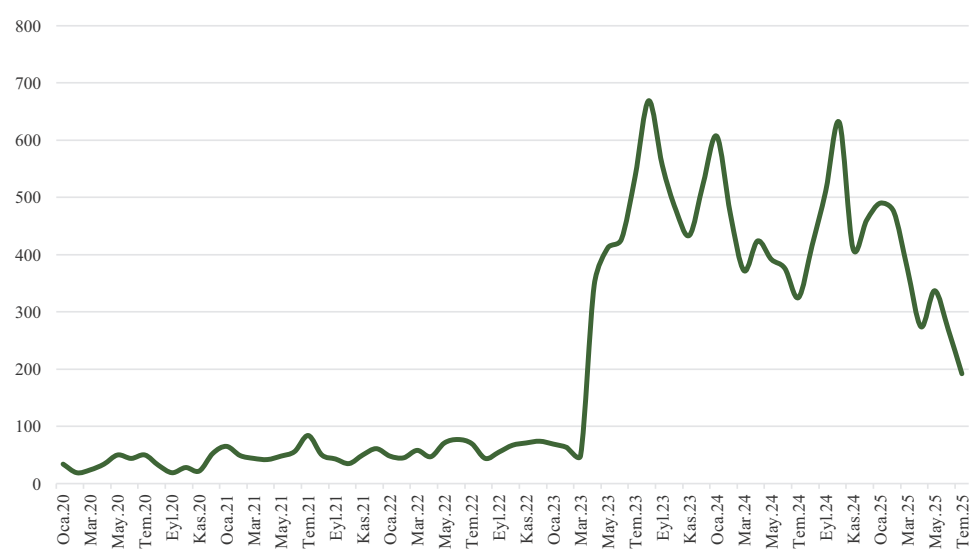


Figure 5. All event types in Sudan (battles, explosions/remote violence/violence against civilians), January 2020 to June 2025

Source: ACLED (2025).

*Data for January to June 2025 represent forecasted events.

Year/month	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	TOTAL
2025	490	475	375	274	337	269	192	265	260	265	257	260	2412
2024	607	471	372	424	392	376	325	416	511	631	411	460	5396
2023	69	63	49	347	412	427	536	669	556	478	434	524	4564
2022	48	45	58	47	71	77	70	44	55	67	71	74	727
2021	65	49	44	42	48	56	84	50	43	35	50	61	627
2020	34	19	24	34	50	44	50	32	19	28	22	53	409

Table 8. All event types in Sudan (battles, explosions/remote violence/violence against civilians), January 2020 to December 2025

Source: ACLED (2025).

*Data for August to December 2025 represent forecasted events.

**Total for 2025 does not include forecasted events.

Year	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Rank	5th	4th	4th	5th	7th	8th	8th	8th	7th	7th	2nd
Total	110.1	110.8	111.5	110.6	108.7	108.0	104.8	105.2	107.1	106.2	109.3
Security apparatus	9.6	9.5	9.2	9.0	8.7	8.4	8.4	8.1	8.2	8.3	9.3
Fractionalised elites	10.0	9.8	10.0	9.7	9.7	9.7	9.4	9.1	9.6	9.6	9.6
Group grievance	9.9	9.7	9.8	10.0	10.0	10.0	9.4	9.5	9.6	9.3	9.6
Economy	8.1	8.6	8.7	8.5	8.0	8.1	8.1	9.1	9.2	9.3	9.4
Economic inequality	8.2	7.9	7.6	7.4	7.7	7.7	8.0	8.3	8.4	8.5	8.8
Human flight and brain drain	8.7	8.8	9.1	8.9	8.6	8.3	8.0	7.7	7.8	7.5	8.0
State legitimacy	9.3	9.6	9.8	9.8	9.7	9.8	9.3	8.8	9.3	9.4	9.5
Public services	9.1	8.8	9.1	8.9	8.9	8.6	8.3	8.8	8.9	8.6	9.0
Human rights	9.3	9.6	9.3	9.6	9.3	9.4	8.9	8.6	9.1	9.2	9.3
Demographic pressures	8.6	8.7	9.0	9.3	9.3	9.4	9.1	9.1	9.1	8.8	8.9
Refugees and IDPs	9.7	10.0	10.0	9.8	9.5	9.6	9.3	9.4	9.5	9.6	9.7
External intervention	9.6	9.8	9.9	9.7	9.2	8.9	8.6	8.7	8.4	8.1	8.2

Table 9. Fragile States Index—Sudan

Source: Fragile States Index (2025).

Military coups and leadership changes in Burkina Faso

Burkina Faso has faced transitional issues, including a history of coups, since gaining independence in 1960. In the run-up to the most recent coup, which took place on September 30, 2022, the country's populace was fed up with the government's inability to address the country's most pressing security issues, and one of the main issues that drew ire from the people was the government's inability to deal with the country's ongoing and escalating insurgencies.

In 1966, the military seized power amid public protests and strikes over government austerity measures. The coup occurred on January 3 of that year in what was then known as the Republic of Upper Volta, led by President Maurice Yaméogo. Military action against the government occurred five years after independence, following years of Yaméogo strengthening his authority through a single-party system and suppressing the opposition. Yaméogo then accepted a financial austerity plan, sparking fierce resistance and resulting in large street protests. On January 4, 1966, a nationwide workers' strike triggered the proclamation of a state of emergency, compelling the country's leader to resign. The military subsequently grabbed power, appointing former army chief of staff Sangoulé Lamizana as the new head of state.

Drought in subsequent years exacerbated the country's hardships, resulting in food and water insecurity for many. Economic opportunities were sparse, and several sectors of the country, particularly agriculture, were subjected to severe strain and disaster. Grievances in the country's numerous labour sectors coincided with these conditions, crippling the state. By the end of the year, on November 25, 1980, Colonel Saye Zerbo had deposed Lamizana in a bloodless coup. The victory was achieved by facilitating the deployment of the military forces of the Military Committee of Recovery for National Progress (MCRNP) to the capital city of the nation, Ouagadougou. On November 7, just two years later, Major Jean-Baptiste Ouedraogo led the Council for the Salvation of the People (CSP) to remove Zerbo from authority. On January 10, 1983, Captain Thomas Sankara, who was implicated in the rebellion, was appointed prime minister. Sankara, who had been removed from power on August 4, subsequently assumed the role of the president of the 'National Council of the Revolution' (CNR) and spearheaded a 'democratic and popular revolution'. This event occurred shortly thereafter. Captain Blaise Compaoré led the coup.

In a violent coup on October 15, 1987, Compaoré, who was opposed to Sankara's revolutionary visions, seized power. The National Revolutionary Council, which was in power, appears to have enticed Sankara to his demise during a meeting. Compaoré was accused of participating in the homicide (McKenna, 2025). One of Africa's longest-serving leaders, Compaoré, was ousted from power in 2014 in a violent popular insurrection, following a power struggle in the country. Compaoré held power for roughly 27 years. Compaoré's reputation was tarnished owing to his failure to

develop the nation, Sankara's death in 1987, and his involvement in regional disputes (including those related to the politics of Liberia, Côte d'Ivoire, and Guinea). He was aware of the extremist group Jama'at Ahl as-Sunnah lid-Da'wah wa'l-J—commonly known in the West as Boko Haram—operating in the country, yet he failed to act on the intelligence provided to him. In a 2014 viewpoint for *The Cable*, Kolawole (2014: n.p.) described Compaoré as 'that traitor who set Africa back by a thousand years when he terminated the life of Thomas Sankara in 1987'.

After the long-serving Compaoré's ouster in 2014, a transitional administration was put in place. In September 2015, a group of soldiers attempted to launch a coup against this government. After short stints in power, coup leaders faced widespread popular opposition which eventually had the leadership removed, restoring the transitional government. Amidst political unrest in November 2015, Roch Marc Christian Kaboré was elected president. Rising violence and massive public demonstrations over security and governance are only two of the many problems his administration has had to deal with.

The most recent revolt, which occurred in 2022, was implemented amid an ongoing state of instability, governance issues, and security challenges, as well as public dissatisfaction. President Kaboré was apprehended as a result of a revolution on January 24, 2022. The military, under the leadership of Lieutenant Colonel Paul-Henri Sandaogo Damiba, assumed control and proclaimed the dissolution of the government. Damiba was appointed as the president of the transitional administration.

The dual coups of 2022 positioned it as a watershed moment. Burkina Faso experienced its second coup of the year on September 30, when Captain Ibrahim Traoré, the commander of an artillery unit within the country's armed forces, declared himself the new head of state. The process led to the ousting of Lieutenant Colonel Paul-Henri Sandaogo Damiba, the previous leader of the junta. Traoré was involved in the January coup of the same year and was assisted in the most recent coup by members of Damiba's military regime, demonstrating splits within the larger coup cadre linked with that year. "Most Burkinabe military officers," according to the Africa Center for Strategic Studies (2022: n.p.), "meanwhile, have not participated in either coup, underscoring the fragmented state of Burkina Faso's armed forces and the highly arbitrary means by which power has changed hands." Traoré, the new regime leader, claimed to have put an end to the country's major security issues and pledged to work towards the restoration of constitutional order.

Burkina Faso has faced plenty of challenges during these events, including political instability, humanitarian crises, economic hardship, and armed conflict. Amidst a substantial rise in humanitarian crises, violence has persisted unabated, resulting in the displacement of hundreds of thousands of individuals. Traoré's leadership culminated in the dismissal of the country's transitional government and

legislature, the suspension of the constitution, and his personal acquisition of all state powers. In addition, he implemented certain measures to establish an appearance of legitimacy for the international community and the public.

The ruling military junta under Traoré announced that it had extended its transitional term by an additional five years, even though Traoré was designated as the transitional president and the junta retained a significant amount of authority through the transitional governing charter. The new junta’s charter largely adhered to the one adopted under Damiba and followed the stipulations established by ECOWAS, which prohibit the transitional president from running for office (AP News, 2024). Additionally, the junta declared national elections in Burkina Faso in July 2024 to be “not a priority” and subsequently postponed them indefinitely (Africa News, 2024). These elections were intended to restore a democratic civilian government.

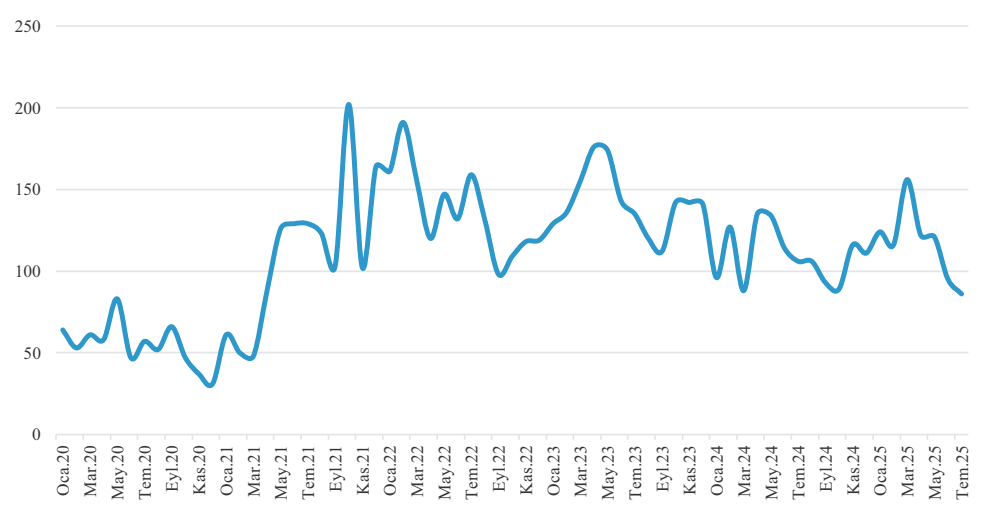


Figure 6. All event types in Burkina Faso (battles, explosions/remote violence/violence against civilians), January 2020 to June 2025

Source: ACLED (2025).

*Data for January to June 2025 represent forecasted events.

Year/month	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	TOTAL
2025	124	116	156	122	121	95	86	90	90	90	90	91	820
2024	96	127	88	135	134	114	106	106	93	89	116	111	1315
2023	129	136	155	176	174	143	135	120	112	142	142	141	1705
2022	161	191	155	120	147	132	159	131	98	109	118	119	1640
2021	61	50	48	88	126	129	129	123	103	202	102	164	1325
2020	64	53	61	58	83	47	57	52	66	47	37	31	656

Table 10. All event types in Burkina Faso (battles, explosions/remote violence/violence against civilians), January 2020 to December 2025

Source: ACLED (2025).

*Data for August to December 2025 represent forecasted events.

**Total for 2025 does not include forecasted events.

Year	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Rank	5th	4th	4th	5th	7th	8th	8th	8th	7th	7th	2nd
Total	110.1	110.8	111.5	110.6	108.7	108.0	104.8	105.2	107.1	106.2	109.3
Security apparatus	9.6	9.5	9.2	9.0	8.7	8.4	8.4	8.1	8.2	8.3	9.3
Fractionalized elites	10.0	9.8	10.0	9.7	9.7	9.7	9.4	9.1	9.6	9.6	9.6
Group grievance	9.9	9.7	9.8	10.0	10.0	10.0	9.4	9.5	9.6	9.3	9.6
Economy	8.1	8.6	8.7	8.5	8.0	8.1	8.1	9.1	9.2	9.3	9.4
Economic inequality	8.2	7.9	7.6	7.4	7.7	7.7	8.0	8.3	8.4	8.5	8.8
Human flight and brain drain	8.7	8.8	9.1	8.9	8.6	8.3	8.0	7.7	7.8	7.5	8.0

State legitimacy	9.3	9.6	9.8	9.8	9.7	9.8	9.3	8.8	9.3	9.4	9.5
Public services	9.1	8.8	9.1	8.9	8.9	8.6	8.3	8.8	8.9	8.6	9.0
Human rights	9.3	9.6	9.3	9.6	9.3	9.4	8.9	8.6	9.1	9.2	9.3
Demographic pressures	8.6	8.7	9.0	9.3	9.3	9.4	9.1	9.1	9.1	8.8	8.9
Refugees and IDPs	9.7	10.0	10.0	9.8	9.5	9.6	9.3	9.4	9.5	9.6	9.7
External intervention	9.6	9.8	9.9	9.7	9.2	8.9	8.6	8.7	8.4	8.1	8.2

Table 11. Fragile States Index—Burkina Faso

Source: Fragile States Index (2025).

Coups, governance breakdown, and cycles of insecurity

The cases of Mali, Niger, Sudan, and Burkina Faso demonstrate how fragile governance, recurrent coups, and persistent insecurity form a self-reinforcing cycle of political instability. Although each state's trajectory is shaped by its own historical and political context, the recurrence of military interventions highlights structural weaknesses shared across the region and raises broader questions about the resilience of African states under conditions of prolonged fragility.

Across these cases, coups have become the predominant mechanism of regime change. Military leaders often frame their actions as necessary correctives to corruption, mismanagement, or rising insecurity, yet their interventions typically deepen rather than resolve underlying problems. Sudan's 2021 coup reignited violent rivalries between the SAF and the RSF, Burkina Faso suffered two successive coups in 2022, and Niger and Mali have experienced repeated takeovers amid public frustration with ineffective civilian governments. These examples highlight how, in the absence of institutionalized checks and balances, the military continues to occupy the role of an arbiter of political legitimacy. Armed forces repeatedly usurp civilian authority, perpetuating a cycle without offering viable governance alternatives.

Insecurity has been a central driver of these political ruptures. Insurgencies in Mali and Burkina Faso, cross-border extremist threats in Niger, and Sudan's factionalized civil conflicts have consistently undermined state authority and eroded public trust in civilian governments. In such contexts, the military presents itself as a guardian of stability, but interventions seldom address the root causes of violence—weak institutions, socio-economic grievances, and unresolved questions of state

legitimacy. Instead, they often exacerbate security dilemmas by fragmenting authority and militarizing political competition.

Importantly, militaries themselves are not cohesive actors. Internal divisions frequently aggravate political instability, as seen in Sudan's descent into war between al-Burhan's SAF and Dagalo's RSF or Burkina Faso's rapid turnover of juntas in 2022. These examples underscore a broader lesson for African politics: the military should not be understood as a unified corporate body but as an arena of competing factions, each seeking to capture the state. Such factionalism raises doubts about the assumption – common in international policy circles – that military regimes can provide stability in the absence of functional civilian institutions.

Public discontent is another recurring catalyst. From Sudan's mass protests that toppled Bashir to Burkina Faso's mobilization against insecurity and Malians' anger at corruption, civilian frustration has created conditions for military intervention. Yet the repeated failure of juntas to deliver on popular demands highlights a fundamental paradox: coups may ride on the wave of protest, but they rarely generate democratic legitimacy. This disconnect helps explain why cycles of unrest so often return after the initial euphoria of regime change fades.

The humanitarian consequences are stark. Sudan, Mali and Burkina Faso have experienced millions of displacements, while Niger grapples with overlapping crises of poverty, food insecurity and extremist threats. Military takeovers have not alleviated these burdens; instead, they have diverted resources, worsened breakdowns of governance and further strained fragile states. The wider implication here is that coup politics is not simply about elite maneuvering but about lives disrupted and institutions eroded, with regional spillover effects across West Africa and North Africa.

Regional and international actors play a crucial but ambiguous role. ECOWAS and the African Union have attempted to pressure juntas in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso toward civilian transitions, while Sudan's conflicts have drawn in neighboring states and external supporters of rival factions. External interventions may provide temporary containment, but they are often reactive, fragmented, and sometimes contradictory. Moreover, the entry of non-Western powers – such as Russia through the Wagner Group – complicates the geopolitical landscape, raising questions about whose interests are ultimately served. The broader implication is that international engagement risks reinforcing cycles of fragility unless it is reoriented toward strengthening institutions rather than managing short-term crises.

Table 12 highlights stark differences in coup risk across the Sahel. Burkina Faso faces a very high risk, with two coups in 2022 and ongoing unrest. Mali and Niger remain high-risk due to repeated coups, fragile military regimes, and insurgent pressures. Chad and Sudan sit at medium-high risk, marked by prolonged military

transitions and unstable power-sharing. In contrast, Mauritania and Senegal benefit from stronger democratic institutions and relative stability, keeping their risk lower. This assessment underscores where military intervention poses the greatest threat and where civilian governance shows resilience.

Country	Coup history and status	Risk outlook
Burkina Faso	Two coups in 2022; thwarted coup attempts; ongoing unrest	Very high
Mali	Multiple coups (2020, 2021); restrictive junta; insurgent pressures	High
Niger	Coup in 2023; fragile military regime; international isolation	High
Chad	Military rule since 2021; extended transition; protests	Medium-high
Sudan	Coup in 2021; unstable power-sharing; protracted conflict	Medium-high
Mauritania	Long tradition of civilian rule; faced political tensions in 2023–2024 but strong democratic institutions; military remains loyal	Medium-low
Senegal	Relatively stable since democratic transition in 2019; military influence persists but contained	Low

Table 12. Coup risk outlook in the Sahel

Source: Compiled by authors.

The fragility of transitional arrangements remains evident even after their announcement. Burkina Faso has postponed elections indefinitely, Sudan’s fragile civilian–military compact collapsed into renewed war, and Mali and Niger have repeatedly extended transitional timelines. These experiences suggest that in militarised political environments, transitions are less pathways back to democracy than extensions of military rule under different guises.

Taken together, the cases of Mali, Niger, Sudan and Burkina Faso illustrate not just the recurrence of coups but the structural conditions that sustain them: weak governance, persistent insecurity, and socio-economic fragility. The broader lesson for African politics is clear—so long as militaries remain central to political authority and institutions remain fragile, cycles of instability will persist. For international actors, the implication is equally pressing: strategies focused narrowly on counterterrorism or diplomatic pressure are insufficient. Breaking these cycles requires long-term investments in institution-building, inclusive governance, and socio-economic resilience; without them, the Sahel and its neighbours will remain vulnerable to the next coup.

These patterns invite reflection on wider debates about coups and state fragility in Africa. The recurrence of military interventions in Mali, Niger, Sudan and Burkina Faso suggests that coups are less one-off ruptures than symptoms of deeper structural weaknesses – weak institutions, contested state legitimacy, and unresolved security crises. Far from restoring order, juntas tend to reproduce the very vulnerabilities that brought them to power, reinforcing cycles of instability. For scholars, these cases underscore the need to move beyond viewing coups as discrete events toward analysing them as embedded in the longer-term trajectories of governance breakdown and conflict. For policymakers, they highlight the limits of short-term crisis management and the importance of sustained strategies that build institutional resilience and strengthen civilian authority. In this sense, the Sahel and its neighbours offer not only urgent policy challenges, but also critical insights into the dynamics of military intervention and state fragility across Africa.

Conclusions and future research

Drawing on the Fragile States Index and the ACLED Conflict Index, this chapter examined selected cases of successful military coups in the Sahel. While coups have periodically swept across the region for decades—and have recently surged—many now argue that Africa is destined to remain plagued by them. Although military takeovers can sometimes generate short-term stability, they have generally worsened the security environment in Sahelian states, producing mixed outcomes.

Despite certain similarities across the country cases examined in this chapter, important variations emerge that allow for meaningful inferences. Not all the states that have experienced coups possess a long history of military intervention. A key factor lies in the military's prominence within each state, which shapes not necessarily the frequency of coups but their orchestration. Furthermore, the maturity and institutional development of the armed forces influence the extent to which militaries are willing—or susceptible—to being instrumentalised as agents of coups.

Amid the recent wave of coups in the Sahel, Senegal remains a striking exception. Since gaining independence from France in August 1960, the country has avoided any military takeover, maintaining over six decades of uninterrupted civilian rule. Its first president, Léopold Sédar Senghor, led the nation until his voluntary resignation at the end of his fifth term in December 1980, setting a precedent for political stability and orderly leadership transition. Ranked 70th in the 2024 State Fragility Index, Senegal has long been regarded as one of the Sahel's most stable democracies, reflected in its moderate score for 'security apparatus' and modest scores for 'group grievance', 'human rights', and 'external intervention'. Like other states, Senegal's economic position is shaped by regional and international uncertainties, while its political challenges – particularly those linked to elections – remain closely tied to economic conditions. Although these factors suggest a generally

promising outlook, they do not appear to be the decisive variables that insulate the country from the risks of coups or the so-called coup contagion.

Senegal has cultivated a robust democratic culture and a professional military that has consistently prioritised the protection of democratic institutions and core values, including the rule of law, political freedom, participation, press freedom, and the right of assembly. However, the postponement of the presidential elections in February 2024 triggered widespread riots across the country, fuelling serious concerns that Senegal could become the next coup-prone state in the region. At the same time, recent attacks on Chad's presidential palace in N'Djamena on January 8, 2025, have further heightened anxieties about political instability in the Sahel.

These cases highlight a shifting landscape in which some countries make progress across different areas both before and after military coups. Strengthening state institutions, however, requires more than military-centred responses; non-military strategies are essential given the multiple drivers of instability. Yet, external actors have often prioritised military and economic interventions over addressing the deeper, structural causes of fragility, including weak state institutions, the effects of climate change, and the persistent challenges of poverty and famine. In the absence of well-designed, long-term strategies, such short-term approaches risk creating new problems while aggravating existing ones. Terrorist and extremist groups, in particular, readily exploit the turmoil generated by these governance gaps, perpetuating a cyclical momentum of fragility across the Sahel.

The Sahel's challenges will endure in the near term. Beyond its deep-rooted political and socio-economic problems, the central Sahel has recently overtaken the Middle East as the global epicentre of terrorism, while also becoming a focal point for shifting partnerships and growing foreign involvement from actors such as the US, the European Union (EU), France, Russia, and China. The region's strategic location, combined with its abundance of natural resources, has further intensified external interest in both exploitation and trafficking. Together, these dynamics have placed immense strain on states across the Sahel, heightening their fragility and increasing their vulnerability to military coups.

Moving forward, future research on the Sahel should investigate how military, political, socio-economic and external factors interact to shape state fragility and coup dynamics, while also assessing policy strategies to mitigate these risks. Key questions include: how variations in military professionalism and institutional maturity influence coup likelihood; what lessons Senegal's resilient civil-military relations offer for neighbouring states; and how structural drivers such as poverty, famine, climate change, economic inequality, and resource exploitation contribute to governance breakdowns. The role of foreign actors – including France, Russia, China, and the US

– also warrants scrutiny, particularly in determining whether their interventions exacerbate instability or can be restructured to strengthen institutions.

Given the Sahel's emergence as a global terrorism hotspot, research should further explore how extremist groups exploit governance gaps during and after coups and how such cycles can be mitigated. Comparative and longitudinal analyses can clarify whether Sahelian coups mirror historical patterns elsewhere, whether military takeovers ever yield sustainable reforms, and which policies – such as professionalising militaries, reinforcing democratic accountability, promoting regional cooperation through ECOWAS and the AU, and fostering inclusive governance – are most effective in building resilience.

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PART III: REGIONAL SECURITY CHALLENGES

CHAPTER 14

Sahel and Water Security

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Abstract

The Sahel faces complex challenges that would be serious separately, but as a fatal combination, this means a very overwhelming situation for governments. Climate change, severe droughts, water scarcity, desertification, demographic explosion, extreme poverty, political instability, terrorism, and irregular migration patterns affect the lives of more than 300 million people who live in this area. The region is expected to experience temperature increases 1.5 times higher than the world average. Climate-related challenges intersect with a complex security situation characterized by conflicts, political crises, and disputes over resource control. Threatened by the effects of climate change, the countries of the Sahel region – some of the poorest in the world – face poor social and economic infrastructure, internal tensions, and institutional weaknesses due to insufficient resilience to food crises and environmental stress. One of the most severe challenges is access to water, which is vital for drinking, sanitation, agriculture, and energy. The proliferation of conflicts due to climate impacts is already visible, and water is a critical resource often linked to tensions.

International partners, particularly the United Nations, the G5 Sahel, the African Union (AU), the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the European Union, international financial institutions, and bilateral strategic partners, share a desire to contribute to stability and development in the Sahel. Unfortunately, the Sahel continues to struggle with a vicious circle of challenges, including a significant surge in armed violence. Profound insecurity is hampering its development, and risks are wiping out the progress made in recent decades.

Introduction

Beyond doubt, one of the most pressing challenges of the 21st century is the significant depletion of freshwater resources and massive contamination. This crisis represents a global concern, as water stress, scarcity, inadequate sanitation, and pollution affect nearly every region of the world. In addition to changing hydrological characteristics, shifting climatic conditions, the overuse and contamination of surface water and the overexploitation and pollution of groundwater play a critical role. These factors contribute to the depletion of water reserves and even the subsidence of megacities. This study focuses on water-related challenges affecting the Sahel region.

According to United Nations reports, 720 million people do not have access to sufficient fresh water, 1.8 billion people worldwide lack access to clean water. In comparison, at least 2.7 billion people have experienced water restrictions. Every year, 5-8 million people lose their lives and nearly 3 billion in total fall ill due to drinking contaminated or polluted water, mainly in Africa and Asia, already environmentally stressed parts of developing countries (UN Environment Program, 2021; SDG 6 Monitoring, 2024). Water scarcity has other consequences in addition to the disruption or complete loss of sanitation: agricultural food yields are radically reduced due to over-irrigation, extreme weather conditions (drought, heavy rainfalls) and the gradual erosion of farmland by natural disasters, leaving the rapidly growing populations without access to even basic food (and thus nutrients). Water scarcity, permanent drought, environmental degradation, and other concomitant factors such as armed conflict and a sense of threat will drive millions to seek their livelihoods elsewhere.

When analyzing today's ecological conflicts, challenges that arise cannot be dealt with as isolated issues. These are not only reasons but also consequences of political, social, and economic conflicts. Global climate change, due to both organic and anthropogenic factors, is altering the hydrological cycle, the amount and distribution of precipitation, 'transforming' the weather, reducing water flows, changing the characteristics of native flora and fauna, causing desertification, droughts and sometimes floods. Human interference further increases the risks, as deforestation, the construction of dams and hydroelectric dams, over-irrigation, outdated and toxic pesticides and insecticides, and the lack of waste management do not mitigate the problems. The crisis is exacerbated when all these negative factors are combined with drastic population growth and political instability. In summary, this is what we see today in the Sahel region of Africa.

Adapting to the effects of climate change is not easy either, as the impacts are becoming more severe, starting a vicious circle that, at best, allows for only a temporary solution to the situation, not a permanent one. Unstable political conditions do not help governments address environmental and social problems effectively, and

the mandate of international actors is limited, partly due to a lack of cooperation and insufficient capacity.

When considering renewable water resources, potable water's annual per capita availability is less than 1,700 m³ – a threshold generally deemed sufficient to meet basic needs. However, this figure drops to less than 700 or even 500 m³ in certain regions. It is concerning that 110-130 million people – primarily in Sub-Saharan Africa – still rely on untreated surface water for consumption (UNICEF–WHO, 2023). Calculating the escalating demand, driven by a global population projected to reach 9 billion by 2050 and 11 billion by 2100, water consumption continues to rise across public utilities, agriculture, industry and energy production (Postel, 2010). Although existing freshwater resources could theoretically support up to 20 billion people if managed with high efficiency, including food production requirements, these factors lower this capacity to an estimated 14-16 billion (Sheikh and Zahurul, 2019).



Map 1. The Sahel region

The Sahel region is – in every sense – one of the most vulnerable areas on Earth.⁵³ This is evident in the population explosion occurring in the region, the negative impacts of climate change, the complex political, religious, military, and environmental conflicts, as well as the potential security challenges of the future. The Sahel forms an almost 6,000-kilometer-long corridor across the Sahara, connecting Central Africa with North Africa and the Red Sea with the Atlantic Ocean. The region includes all or part of Mauritania, Senegal, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Chad, Nigeria, Cameroon, Sudan, South Sudan, Eritrea, and Ethiopia. The region is semi-arid, though less dry and desert-like than the Sahara to the north. Sand deserts largely border this vast area to the north and savannahs to the south. A land where religions and cultures meet and blend, the Sahel is gaining increasing geopolitical significance as it is considered the southern gate of Europe (Glien, 2024). Since the 1990s, alongside a dramatic population boom, the people of the Sahel have been grappling with worsening

⁵³ CLIMATE. The Sahel Faces 3 Issues: Climate, Conflict & Overpopulation. Vision of Humanity. [online] Available at: <https://www.visionofhumanity.org/challenges-facing-the-sahel-climate-conflict-and-overpopulation/> (Accessed 01 10 2024)

environmental conditions, intensified by climate change, ethnic conflicts, political instability, terrorism, extreme poverty, and mass migration (Besenyő, 2019; Besenyő, Issaev and Korotayev, 2024). The Sahel region has historically endured a series of extreme weather events and has faced severe and long-lasting droughts over centuries. Droughts can jeopardize harvests and increase the volatility of food prices, making it even harder for the poorest to buy food.

Currently, permanent water scarcity and droughts, exacerbated by accelerating climate change, affect an estimated 200-250 million people. With the population projected to increase dramatically to approximately 400 million by 2050, these challenges are expected to intensify (IFAD, 2024). Quantitative analysis indicates that population growth in the Sahel is set to accelerate after 2025, driven by large cohorts resulting from historically high fertility rates. Poverty is more widespread in the Sahel than in most other parts of Africa, with up to 80% of the population living on less than \$2 a day, which means more than 140 million people need to face extreme poverty (Sahel Development Report, 2023).

Rapid population growth poses significant challenges, including the potential to undermine educational progress, strain limited public services, and leave more young people without access to job opportunities. Unemployment is already a critical issue, affecting half of all youth in Mali and Niger. These socio-economic pressures further elevate the risks of crime and violence in the region. In addition, the region's population is predominantly young, with median ages ranging between 15 and 19 years (Population and Development in the Sahel, 2016). Given current demographic trends, countries in this area are unlikely to experience significant aging in the coming decades.

Sahel, the d(r)ying region

The Sahel region, a semi-arid belt south of the Sahara Desert, is experiencing significant water-related challenges due to climate change, population growth, and environmental degradation. Water scarcity often affects daily life, agriculture, and overall survival. In the last six decades, the difficulty of accessing water has become a physical challenge and a metaphor for more profound struggles related to survival and power dynamics within the region. It is worth mentioning that the Sahel is not a homogeneous entity but a very diverse, multicultural, multiethnic, and multi-religious area. This is precisely the diversity that gives the region its dual characteristics. On the one hand, some elements affect all countries equally, such as the effects of climate change and population explosion. At the same time, different geographical characteristics and conditions offer various opportunities for solutions to governments and international actors. Indeed, access to water is a key to survival in a region that symbolizes the emotional and social distance between different communities. The increasingly severe impacts of climate change have only served to reinforce the

traditional propensity to migrate in the region. Highlighting one environmental cause: droughts are not unusual phenomena in the region. However, they are becoming more frequent and severe, exacerbating food insecurity, poverty, and migration. Although only tangentially related to water, it is worth highlighting the issues of land degradation, deforestation, and economic inequalities, which complicate water access problems.

Sub-Saharan Africa, including the Sahel region, is most acutely affected by ecological threats globally. This vulnerability is driven by severe water scarcity, food insecurity, rapid population growth, and weak governance structures. According to the 2024 Ecological Threat Report⁵⁴, the Sahel belt is identified as one of three ecological hotspots – regions experiencing intensified environmental stress and an increased likelihood of systemic collapse. Extreme temperatures, erratic rainfall patterns, and prolonged periods of intense drought characterize the Sahel's climate. The United Nations has highlighted the region's exceptional vulnerability to climate change, with temperatures rising 1.5 times the global average (Sahel Education White Paper, 2021). Over the past three decades, recurring droughts in already arid conditions have increasingly hindered agricultural productivity and posed significant challenges to crop cultivation.

Sahelian countries have some of the lowest access rates to water and sanitation in the world. According to the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), nearly 40% of Africa's population does not have access to a safe source of freshwater. More than 300 million out of the 400 million people in the Sahel lack access to clean water, and 70% lack adequate sanitation (Bogmis, 2023). The situation is even more precarious in the Sahel, where people's livelihoods depend mainly on agriculture and livestock farming, making them vulnerable to climate change, especially semi-nomadic cattle herders, who move with the seasonal flooding of the Niger. Their livelihoods are also threatened by radical changes, with many moving to the cities, where they face the global problems of civilization caused by sudden urbanization. Moreover, governments in the region do not have a "clear vision" for water use.

The dichotomy mentioned above can be seen in many areas in the region. The Sahel is highly exposed to climate change, intensifying the region's vulnerability to water-related issues. The region endures frequent droughts and floods, disrupting traditional agropastoral practices and contributing to instability. For instance, Lake Chad, a vital water source for approximately 30 million people, has dramatically lost its size since the 1960s, shrinking by 95%. This decline has led to the displacement of 2.3 million residents and a humanitarian crisis. Other lakes and smaller streams are also disappearing gradually, and the water flows in rivers are decreasing, which could trigger short-term and longer-term conflicts (Denisova and Kostalyanets, 2024).

⁵⁴ Ecological Threat Report 2024: Analysing ecological threats, resilience & peace. Institute for Economics & Peace, Sydney, Australia. [online] Available at: <http://visionofhumanity.org/resources> (Accessed 22 11 2024).

Desertification further exacerbates water scarcity. Droughts and unsustainable land use have degraded soils, pushing farmers to expand into territories traditionally used by nomadic herders. This encroachment has sparked conflicts over diminishing resources.

The Ecological Threat Report 2024 identified 27 ecological hotspots that face ecological risks associated with low societal resilience. 17 countries out of 27 are situated in sub-Saharan Africa. This analysis also portrays the links among seemingly separated political, economic, and social factors: negative impacts of global climate change are going to stress water resources, rising sea level that increases salinity in some of the most fertile agricultural regions, extreme weather, rapidly changing weather patterns with floods and massive droughts, heatwaves, and heavy rainfalls. The changing and decreasing precipitation patterns in the Sahel since the 1970s have been a significant concern, influencing many environmental, social, and economic dynamics in the region. The Sahel has experienced increased variability in rainfall, characterized by periods of severe droughts and more frequent dry spells, which have led to considerable consequences for agriculture, water availability, and overall human well-being. The Sahel region has witnessed a notable decline in rainfall since the 1970s, with some areas experiencing a reduction of up to 30% in annual precipitation. This period of reduced rainfall, particularly between the 1970s and the early 1990s, resulted in catastrophic droughts, which caused widespread crop failure, famine, and displacement in many parts of the Sahel, including countries like Mali, Niger, Chad, and Sudan (Hulme, Osborn and Jones, 1998). The academic community agrees that Sahel rainfall variability is linked to changes in sea surface temperatures in the tropical Atlantic and Indian Oceans, explaining the observed precipitation decline and variability (Lebel and Ali, 2009).

The Sahel mainly receives a low to very low amount of precipitation annually. The interior of the area generally receives between 200 mm and 700 mm of rain. Along with the overall decrease in precipitation, the region has also faced increased rainfall variability. This means the Sahel has been more susceptible to extreme weather events – prolonged dry periods followed by intense rainfall, often leading to flash floods or exacerbating desertification (Nicholson, 2001). Erratic patterns complicate agricultural planning and water resource management, as farmers and pastoralists cannot predict seasonal rainfall reliably. Pastoralism is an essential economic sector in the Sahel, with more than 20 million people living from nomadic and semi-nomadic livestock. Despite rapid urbanization, 64% of the Sahelian population lives in rural areas and depends mainly on agriculture and livestock income. It is no coincidence that livestock numbers have quadrupled in recent decades (Alliance Sahel, 2024). The livestock sector accounts for about 15 percent of the region's GDP, but pastoralists are highly vulnerable to climatic uncertainties and water scarcity. This is why several

programs (Sahel Groundwater Initiative established by Cooperation in International Waters in Africa – CIWA, World Bank’s Regional Sahel Pastoralism Support Project – PRAPS) have been launched to protect groundwater in addition to surface water (Bertone and Sou, 2023; Podgorski, 2024).

In the Sahel region, hotter climate patterns, reduced rainfall, and extreme weather conditions disproportionately affect pastoralists, farmers and fishermen who rely on renewable natural resources. Agricultural employment varies across the Sahel, ranging from 25 percent in Burkina Faso to 75 percent in Niger, with women accounting for 40 percent of the regional agricultural workforce. Women and young girls are highly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change due to factors such as limited social mobility and limited access to decision-making and resources, including land and markets for income generation (McOmber, 2020). In addition, in many cases, they are the ones who provide water for the whole family and spend hours transporting the required amount of water instead of/alongside their studies.

Water – Energy – Food

The WEF (Water – Energy – Food) matrix should take regional characteristics into account. *Water* is essential to supply the growing population, but water is also needed to generate *energy* for development and to produce food. Irrigation alone is not a solution, partly because of the sheer size of agricultural land and partly because eroded soil cannot absorb the required amount of water. Therefore, governments must protect the quality of natural waters, limit the construction of dams for *energy* production, and develop modern, efficient water management systems. Apart from a few good and forward-looking examples, this is not possible in the countries of the region, even though projects (i.e. FREXUS, Burkina Faso’s Bottom-Up Energy Planning methodology) are based in Mali, Niger, and Chad, coordinated by the Lake Chad Basin Commission and Niger Basin Authority and includes capacity building for country stakeholders to address conflict and climate change in an integrated way (Sahel Development Report, 2023). The FREXUS (Food Resilience in the Sahel) project⁵⁵ is a research initiative focusing on improving *food security* and resilience in the Sahel region of West Africa. It aims to address the challenges of climate change and socio-economic pressures in the region. The project typically involves multiple stakeholders, including researchers, policymakers, and organizations, and focuses on sustainable agricultural practices, improving livelihoods, and increasing food production to make communities more resilient to environmental and economic shocks. The project’s primary objectives are to increase food security by improving agricultural practices and market access, promoting more sustainable and adaptable

⁵⁵ FREXUS – Improving security and climate resilience in a fragile context through the Water-Energy-Food Nexus. [online] Available at: <https://www.water-energy-food.org/frexus-improving-security-and-climate-resilience-in-a-fragile-context-through-the-water-energy-food-nexus> (Accessed 04 10 2024)

farming techniques, and supporting local economies by fostering innovation and improving access to resources and knowledge. Increasing renewable energy production, especially solar energy, is vital for future planning.

According to current trends, the population of the Sahel will triple by 2050, with 64% of the population under 25. This will make the water supply more complex and pose serious food security challenges. Rapid population growth and deteriorating ecological conditions will make food security almost impossible. Armed conflicts and political instability are exacerbating the situation. It is no coincidence, for example, that in Niger, which has the highest fertility rate in the world (6.75 births per woman in 2022), 83% of the population of 28 million people do not have access to sufficient food of sufficient quality (World Food Programme, 2024).

The Sahel – and in particular the northern Sahel – is also suffering from a decline in groundwater and groundwater resources due to a lack of rainfall and surface run-off, as well as a reduction in the amount of water extracted from rivers or wells. The general market orientation of industrial agriculture in the Sahel has led to a rapid expansion of arable land, which has increased soil degradation. Since the first decade of the 2000s, the struggle for water has been taking place in the world grain markets. Experts, in part, have attributed the steady rise in food prices since 2007 to a sharp increase in the production of biofuel crops and energy crops, but this has not been the whole truth. The emergence of capital, partly speculative and fleeing the mortgage crisis, in the crop market has created an abnormal virtual demand for the main crops such as wheat, corn and soya, which reflects real needs only in the long term. Thus, the real economic process encouraged farmers to grow food or fodder crops that traders could buy at high prices. Agricultural production has not increased significantly in the last 30 years due to these serious problems, so almost half (40%) of the population is food insecure (Climate, Peace and Security Fact Sheet, 2021).

Water security and water diplomacy

Water security is defined as the availability of an acceptable quantity and quality of water for health, livelihoods, ecosystems and production (Strengthening Regional Water Security, 2021). It is important to distinguish between the basic hydrological, climatic, political and economic challenges affecting surface water, groundwater protection and use, water supply, water pollution and water treatment. In addition to being the most fundamental source and sustainer of life, water has many uses. Surface waters (rivers, lakes) play an important role not only in the supply of water for domestic use but also for transport (shipping, transport), energy production (hydroelectric power stations), irrigation (agriculture) and industrial production. Because of these factors, water security cannot be seen as an isolated objective. Still, it must be considered in conjunction with internal and external policy developments, demographic, economic, and migration processes. The multiple ecological threats

related to food insecurity, water stress, and water shortage coincide with demographic pressure and will affect other processes regarding health, development, and societal resilience.

According to the UN-Water 2013 report, water security is a complex phenomenon (Water Security, 2013), including:

1. good governance (institutions, infrastructure),
2. transboundary cooperation (states discuss and coordinate their actions),
3. peace and political stability that help preserve water quality and
4. financing that ensures sources involving the public and private sectors.

The multidimensional concept refers to the capacity of a population to ensure access to adequate quantities of acceptable quality water for sustaining livelihoods, preserving ecosystems, and adapting to climate variability and water-related disasters. It encompasses managing water resources to serve recent and future human needs and reduce the odds of conflicts over water and the risks induced by massive droughts, floods and pollution. Grey and Sadoff (2007) provided a valuable framework for understanding how water security affects economic growth, sustainable development, and poverty alleviation. Considering this concept of water security, the Sahel region needs to face extreme and unique challenges now and in the future. In the Sahel region, feasible economic growth should be based on managing water scarcity and harnessing water as a driver to increase capacities. This could involve investing in water infrastructure for irrigation, hydropower, and urban water supply systems to improve agricultural productivity, energy access, and resilience to climate shocks. In addition, in the Sahel, reducing risks from water-related disasters has become an essential aim. Recurring droughts and erratic rainfall necessitate building adaptive capacities through sustainable water management, such as drought-resistant crop varieties, rainwater harvesting systems, and flood control measures. For the Sahel, addressing water insecurity can directly reduce livelihood vulnerabilities, particularly for subsistence farmers and pastoralists who rely heavily on rain-fed agriculture. Insecurity across the region is limiting the movements of pastoralists in search of water and fodder, further increasing the pressure on resources. In some areas, conflicts are so intense that they escalate into violence.

Water also plays an increasingly significant role in political-diplomatic conflicts and regional crisis zones: international conflicts related to water supply, rivers and lakes across borders are increasingly more common (Gleick and Iceland 2018). Where those water bodies provide more than one country's water supply, tensions or particular conflicts can be unleashed, mostly caused by upstream countries around the source applying their water extraction or some unusual regulations to limit the volume of water streams (constructing hydroelectric power plants, dams, etc.) to a

downstream country. A powerful and influential upstream country can dominate the use of rivers and control water supply at its discretion (Yousef, 2019). Conflicts remain mostly isolated cases, and governments have been able to manage them through diplomacy. Therefore, finding peaceful solutions to address water flow issues became significant for countries in the 20th century. Cooperation and ensuring a sufficient water supply would be the ideal way to preserve peace and prosperity. But suppose disputes on the international political level are coupled with food scarcity or rapid demographic growth in regions already burdened by historical, ethnic, and religious antagonisms (North Africa and Sub-Saharan Africa). In that case, conflict is practically inevitable (Glied and Kacziba, 2021).

Water diplomacy (hydro-diplomacy) covers intergovernmental negotiations, concluded conventions and international regulations for the prevention and control of transboundary water pollution, flood protection, the provision of water flows and the resolution of conflicts arising therefrom. Furthermore, water diplomacy is responsible for using diplomatic instruments – negotiations, conflict-resolution mechanisms, the establishment of a consultation platform – instead of showing off force and the language of the threat. Water diplomacy ensures long-lasting cooperation, stability, and peaceful political settlement. The acquisition, possession, and use of natural resources can generate conflicts of varying intensity between the states involved, many of which can be resolved cordially.

Few countries on Earth have only national rivers, so disputes over international rivers are also subject to international law to settle such disputes. This means that, while a state is free to control the water sources and water bodies on its territory, it must ensure adequate water flows, pollution prevention and control, and maintain water quality. Thus, water diplomacy ensures diplomatic channels for discussing transboundary water bodies, rivers, lakes, and groundwater reserves. Despite political tensions, countries like Senegal, Mauritania, and Mali have cooperated over shared water resources, demonstrating that water diplomacy can transcend conflicts. Moreover, water diplomacy strengthens local capacities for water cooperation to foster social cohesion by recognizing that intercommunity conflicts exacerbate insecurity, and empowering local stakeholders is crucial for sustainable peace. This is extremely important in the region because diminishing water availability intensifies competition between farmers and herders, often resulting in violent clashes (Denisova and Kostelyanets, 2024). Historically, these groups coexisted peacefully, but the escalating scarcity has strained relations, contributing to regional instability. Conflicts frequently arise between farmers and herders in the Sahel region due to disputes over access to water and land use. The farmer-herder tensions in Africa are exacerbated by resource competition, shrinking grazing lands, and the reallocation of water and land for agricultural purposes. Notably, many experts regard the Darfur conflict as the first conflict driven entirely by climate change.

The Sahel region's water issues are directly tied to several of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially those focusing on environmental sustainability, human well-being, and poverty reduction. Given the region's vulnerability to climate change, droughts, and desertification, achieving the SDGs related to water (SDG 6) is a significant challenge.⁵⁶ According to estimates, Sub-Saharan Africa's population is projected to increase by more than 70 percent by 2050, placing further pressure on already strained food and water supplies. Already dysfunctional public services – education, health, sanitation, and public services – are unable to adapt to the challenges of a rapidly growing population and urbanization. In Africa, one out of every three people experiences water scarcity, and 13 countries face critical water insecurity. Most African nations are falling behind in meeting the water-related SDGs. Approximately 85.5% of the continent's population lacks access to safely managed drinking water, while 82% live without access to safely managed sanitation services (Chakrabaty, 2024).

Over the past 30 years, water levels in the Sahel region have declined significantly due to increasing demand for water resources, leading to reductions in river flows ranging from 25% to 60%. Lake Chad has lost approximately 95% of its surface area since the 1960s due to intensive water use, altered rainfall patterns, and rising temperatures (Okpara, 2015). The region is sustained by 11 major rivers, including those flowing into Lake Chad, Queme, Volta, Niger, Bandama, Comoé, Senegal, Sassandra, and Gambia-Gorubal basins. Several river basin authorities collectively manage these water resources, as the rivers traverse multiple hydrological zones and cross-national borders (Sahel Development Report, 2023).



Map 2. Transboundary water sheds in the Sahel region. *Source: World Bank/Cartography Unit*

⁵⁶ The Global Goals/UN SDGs. SDG 6. Clean Water and Sanitation. [online] Available at: <https://www.globalgoals.org/goals/6-clean-water-and-sanitation/> (Accessed 11 11 2024)

In West Africa, the three most significant rivers in the region, the Niger, the Volta and the Senegal, have seen their water flows fall by nearly 40% since the 1970s. Given that West Africa's 17 countries share a total of 25 river basins, these radical changes are a source of constant tension between the river basin countries concerned. Nigeria and Niger share the Niger River, Senegal, Mauritania and Mali share the Senegal River, Ghana and Burkina Faso share the Volta River. At the same time, Cameroon and Chad have clashed over water sharing on Lake Chad. Conflicts over water sharing have been exacerbated by the huge dam-building projects that have been and are being carried out in the region. Nigeria has built more than 300 smaller dams in addition to its three large dam systems, but Mali, Mauritania, Niger and Burkina Faso also have several dams. Among these projects, the Merowe High Dam in Sudan, Africa's largest contemporary hydropower project, stands out. In addition, smaller local dams, spillways, canal systems, and reservoirs are being built in many places in the region to provide water for the population and to retain water. The latter helps farmers, pastoralists and herders to access water. These projects are primarily financed with the help of international grants and development banks, but the primary responsibility lies first and foremost with the Sahel partners. Apparently, they will not succeed on their own, as they are facing many challenges at the same time.

Techniques, projects and initiatives

Water distribution across the Sahel is highly uneven. While countries like Nigeria have relatively adequate water supplies, others, such as Burkina Faso, face acute water scarcity. Nations such as Burkina Faso, Mauritania, and Niger are heavily dependent on transboundary water sources, and countries like Mali and Chad also experience significant challenges in managing water resources.

In the Sahel region's drylands, the land cannot support plant life in the dry season. In countries like Burkina Faso, rainfall arrives over a much shorter time, with the rainy season typically lasting for three months⁵⁷. During the rainy season, water merges into central water systems such as lakes and rivers. The climate is so hot and dry for most of the year that even when the rain arrives, it does not remain on the land for long, and a lot of water simply evaporates into the air. After nine months of arid conditions, the soil dries out and forms a nearly impenetrable crust. As a result, instead of rain being absorbed into the ground, most of the water runs off the land's surface. Several attempts have been made to replenish the shrinking water, but little progress has been achieved.

As water cycles become shaped by the poor, erratic, and delayed rains, as well as rising temperatures, a great barrier is placed on people's traditional mode of living, threatening people who have been custodians of the environment for centuries

⁵⁷ From mid-June to September.

(Bajaha, 2024). Having more water nearby can provide several benefits to the communities. Children living in the villages can attend school rather than miss classes to help their parents look for and carry water. Women no longer have to walk long distances to retrieve water from point resources (usually boreholes).⁵⁸ With water points nearby, women can contribute to household nutrition through home gardens and have more time for other duties, such as childcare.

Healthy land offers natural, long-term storage for water. Shallow ground reservoirs, small earthen dams, groundwater wells, natural depressions and rooftop harvesting can help manage conflicts among different users, such as agriculturalist ethnicities and semi-nomadic pastoralists, related to water scarcity, which intensify during the dry season. Relatively simple rainwater-harvesting techniques can make water available; land management techniques like half-moons⁵⁹, zai pits⁶⁰, or stone bunds⁶¹ can help reduce the run-off and get the maximum benefits from the limited season of rainfall. Water conservation methods can also help reduce the risk of wildfires by increasing humidity.

Land restoration efforts must be scaled up, and climate-smart methods like agroecology and agroforestry can help to restore degraded farmland, increase biodiversity, and grow incomes. Using 'nature-based solutions' can bring about many social and environmental benefits. For example, trees can be used to tackle various problems. Organizations like Tree Aid⁶² or the Sahara and Sahel Observatory (Observatoire du Sahara et du Sahel – OSS) aim to promote integrated and collaborative management of natural resources in Africa.

Without many rivers to draw water from, groundwater systems are the region's main source of fresh water. Most available fresh water is located in underground aquifers, but the information on these resources is inadequate. Where groundwater is available, it is traditionally drawn up in buckets from open wells. These are several meters deep, and anything can fall into them. Even rain is not a guarantee of clean water: the streams and temporary ponds are shared with livestock, waste, and other pollutants contaminate the supply, making the water unsafe to drink.

The lack of reliable and coherent information about the Sahelian aquifers gently affects sound decision-making regarding the joint management and rational use of this

⁵⁸ Change for Impact, Transforming Agriculture and Rural Development in IsDB Member Countries (2018). Islamic Development Bank Group, 2018. [online] Available at: <https://www.isdb.org/sites/default/files/media/documents/2022-02/00-IsDB-AgriBook-2018.pdf> (Accessed 14 11 2024)

⁵⁹ Half-moons are semi-lunar holes in the ground with the opening perpendicular to the flow of water.

⁶⁰ Zai pits are holes in the soil that trap water.

⁶¹ Stone bunds are barriers to prevent water running off the land.

⁶² Tree Aid has been working in the region since 1985. It works with communities in Burkina Faso, Ghana, Mali, Niger, Senegal and Ethiopia to tackle poverty and the effects of the climate crisis in the drylands of Africa by growing trees, improving incomes, and restoring and protecting land; see: <https://www.treeaid.org/>

scarce resource. In 2012, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) initiated a four-year project to enhance the participating countries' ⁶³ Knowledge and understanding of the five large transboundary aquifers they share. ⁶⁴ The project was undertaken with partners such as UNESCO, Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) and the Sahara and Sahel Observatory, ⁶⁵ and supported information and technology sharing as well as capacity building. Over the years, local scientists have collected almost 2000 samples from wells, rivers and rain. The IAEA experts have helped them analyse these samples using hydrochemical analyses and mapping techniques, and they have also helped interpret the data. Ultimately, the isotope studies confirmed the existence of large quantities of good-quality groundwater in several parts of the project area, and the data gathered have provided valuable information, including origin and flow patterns between different aquifers and contamination levels in the basins. Moreover, local scientists have a broad understanding of 'isotope hydrology' and access to a network of specialists from other countries. ⁶⁶

Given the Sahel's strategic geographical position, natural resources, and the multitude of actors involved in the region, the critical role of water can foster multi-partner initiatives to address interconnected economic, social, environmental, and security challenges. Several organizations and agencies work together to offer responses to the Sahel's complex water challenges, including the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD), UN-Water/Africa, the African Union (AU), the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS), the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the West African Economic and Monetary Union (WAEMU), the G5 Sahel, ⁶⁷ the African Ministers' Council on Water (AMCOW), the Permanent Inter-State Committee on Drought Control in the Sahel (CILSS) ⁶⁸, the Climate Commission for the Sahel region (CCRS – Commission Climat pour la Région

⁶³ 13 countries: Algeria, Benin, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Chad, Ghana, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal and Togo.

⁶⁴ The Lullemeden Aquifer System, the Liptako-Gourma-Upper Volta System, and the Senegalo-Mauritanian, Lake Chad and Taoudeni basins.

⁶⁵ OSS is an international organisation founded in 1992. Currently, it has 28 African and 7 non-African member countries. OSS works on creating and supporting partnerships to jointly address the challenges related to water resources management and the implementation of international agreements on land degradation, biodiversity and climate change. These programs aim to promote collaborative and integrated management of natural resources in Africa; see: <https://www.oss-online.org/en/about-the-oss>

⁶⁶ Scientists Explore Groundwater in the Sahel with Nuclear Technology. IAEA. 02 05 2017. [online] Available at: <https://www.iaea.org/newscenter/news/scientists-explore-groundwater-in-the-sahel-with-nuclear-technology> (Accessed 12 11 2024)

⁶⁷ In 2014, Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger set up the G5 Sahel group of countries to foster close cooperation in the region and tackle the major challenges these countries face.

⁶⁸ CILSS was established in 1973 after the serious droughts that hit the Sahel in the 1970s.

du Sahel)⁶⁹, the Lake Chad Basin Commission, the African Development Bank, the Islamic Development Bank and the World Bank. They support accelerating and scaling up ongoing initiatives to advance sustainable development and resilience across the Sahel region. The international community and the regional partners also have a role to play in improving the coordination efforts, fostering new partnerships, and galvanizing resource mobilization.

The main instrument for water in Africa is the African Water Facility (AWF), which provides assistance and facilitates the mobilization of resources to address the vast investment gap that is needed for the development of water infrastructure. The objective of the AWF is to mobilize and deploy financial and human resources to ensure water security in Africa. It prepares projects, promotes water knowledge, and supports water governance, providing grants and technical assistance to ensure that projects are bankable, viable, and future-proofed.⁷⁰ From 2006 to 2023, the AWF mobilized approximately €205 million from 20 bilateral and multilateral financial institutions, foundations, and governments. The AWF's vision was 'Towards water for all by 2025', which implies ensuring water for all citizens for all uses: drinking, sanitation, agriculture, industry, energy, transport, tourism and ecosystems.⁷¹

The Sahel Alliance was founded in 2017 to coordinate the development cooperation, bringing together 27 organizations and countries.⁷² Members realized that the Sahel remained one of the world's poorest and least developed regions, facing security challenges and fundamental economic, social, and environmental vulnerabilities. Fragility mainly comes from the weakness of governments because the failed (South Sudan) and failing states (Chad, Niger, Mali) are not able to keep control over their administrative territories, primarily in peripheral and cross-border areas. The members of the Sahel Alliance are supporting some initiatives in the Sahel to address the impacts of climate change. The food and nutrition situation has remained extremely worrying since 2020. In 2024, more than 38 million people were affected by food shortages and nutrition insecurity in the Sahel region.⁷³

⁶⁹ CCRS was established in 2017 as an interstate organization designed under the aegis of the AU. It brings together 17 countries: Benin, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Cape Verde, Chad, Côte d'Ivoire, Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Gambia, Guinea, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal and Sudan.

⁷⁰ The Governing Council of the AWF is made up of 13 members appointed by African Ministers' Council on Water (AMCOW), donors to the Fund, the African Development Bank, the African Union (AU) and UN-Water/Africa.

⁷¹ African Water Facility. About Us. [online] Available at: <https://www.africanwaterfacility.org/en/about-us#history> (Accessed 12 10 2024)

⁷² The Sahel Alliance was passed and signed by the EU, France and Germany, and followed by the Partnership for Security and Stability in the Sahel (P3S) in 2019 and the International Coalition for the Sahel in 2020, as a framework for political and strategic engagement.

⁷³ The Sahel Alliance (n.d.). [online] Available at: <https://www.alliance-sahel.org/en/sahel-alliance/> (Accessed 22 12 2024)

Finally, the Great Green Wall is Africa's largest sustainable development initiative. It is a Pan-African pioneer initiative to restore degraded landscapes in the Sahel region as a means of addressing water and food security, conflict and forced migration. The idea of a green protection barrier against desert advancement was first envisioned in 2005 (UNCCD, 2020). The Pan African Agency of the Great Green Wall (PA-GGW) was established in 2010 under the aegis of the African Union and the Community of the Sahelo-Saharan States (CEN-SAD) to coordinate and follow up on the realization of the initiative.

The project has received international acclaim for its bold aspirations, involving a range of stakeholders, including national governments, international organizations,⁷⁴ the private sector and civil society. The Great Green Wall is a cross-continental effort to hold back the desert, improve biodiversity, grow income, and capture carbon between isohyets 100 and 400 mm, over a distance of 7000 km and 15 km wide, from Senegal to Djibouti. Initially targeting 11 Sahelian countries,⁷⁵ the initiative was built to halt the progress of the Sahara Desert. Nowadays, it is widely recognized that tree-planting alone will not bring transformation in the Sahel, and the initial project of 'a wall of trees' has been replaced by a more feasible initiative, an integrated ecosystem management approach that consists of a mosaic of different actions (Ingrosso and Pausata, 2024). Nevertheless, the Great Green Wall is, above all, a unique, forward-looking natural resources governance solution driven by local communities themselves. This approach can ensure that the project is tailored to the specific needs of the region.⁷⁶

Considering the massive carbon storage potential of the African continent, the realization of the Great Green Wall could influence climate trends, and its completion by 2030 would be a vital step towards transforming the Sahel from a region scarred by climate change to a beacon of resilience and sustainability. Beyond tree planting, land restoration and carbon sequestration, the Great Green Wall has generated employment and income for communities, thereby advancing development, peace and stability in the region.

Conclusions

For various reasons, the reports of the IPCC have clearly identified Africa as the most vulnerable continent to climate change, and the Sahel is one of the continent's most vulnerable regions. Three countries in the Sahel region – Chad, Mali and Niger – rank among the top seven most vulnerable countries to climate change.

⁷⁴ For example, UNCCD, FAO, the World Bank, the Global Environment Facility (GEF), the European Union (EU) and the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN).

⁷⁵ Burkina Faso, Chad, Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal and Sudan.

⁷⁶ Great Green Wall Homegrown Solutions to Accelerate Climate Action and Development. 23 01 2023. UNDP. [online] Available at: <https://www.undp.org/africa/stories/great-green-wall-homegrown-solutions-accelerate-climate-action-and-development> (Accessed 11 12 2024)

In the Sahel, over 300 million people are affected by a drastic reduction in fertile land and the climate crisis.

The Sahel is susceptible to recurrent droughts, land degradation, and erratic rainfall patterns, which have severe consequences for agriculture and contribute to insecurity. Climate impacts are crucial in understanding the complex multidimensional crisis and provide an essential lens for interpreting the root causes of insecurities. There is a close correlation between higher temperatures and increased conflict and a more mixed correlation between higher rainfall variability and conflict, with low state capacity as an aggravating factor. Causality is bi-directional: climate change can undermine state capacity, increasing vulnerability to conflict and instability, while fragility, in turn, undercuts countries' ability to mitigate the effects of climate change.⁷⁷

Temperatures are increasing at twice the global rate, so urgency and equity go hand in hand when taking action on the climate crisis. Security challenges are inherently transnational, and the particularly transnational nature of water issues requires extending the geographic scope of action. The pressing challenges of the Sahel have potential spill-over effects outside the region, including Europe.

Several initiatives have been taken in recent decades to alleviate and solve the problems of Africa and the Sahel region in particular. In close cooperation with regional organizations and governments, the United Nations, the European Union, and various NGOs are trying to address the region's problems. Important areas for intervention include improving water management and governance, agricultural innovation, production efficiency and resilience, and strengthening national and regional institutional capacities, particularly to improve decision-making. The shared vision of all these initiatives is that, despite negative trends, the region's countries have enormous potential for sustainability.

⁷⁷ Bank Group's Strategy for Addressing Fragility and Building Resilience in Africa (2022-2026), March 2022, Annex IV. African Development Bank Group. [online] Available at: <https://www.afdb.org/en/documents/bank-groups-strategy-addressing-fragility-and-building-resilience-africa-2022-2026> (Accessed 02 12 2024)

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PART III: REGIONAL SECURITY CHALLENGES

CHAPTER 15

Food Safety and Security in The Sahel

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Abstract

The chapter aims to present the key factors influencing food security and food safety in the Sahel region. Through specific examples it demonstrates that despite its desert and semi-desert climate – and the fact that it essentially forms a transitional zone between the desert and the savanna with all its implications, the region possesses significant potential for food production and agriculture. However, the most crucial climatic factor for food production, precipitation, remains entirely unpredictable.

In addition, the study explores the long-standing and unresolved problems that have persisted in the region from a food security perspective. Combined with the reality of our globalizing world, these issues push millions into food insecurity and forced migration, despite the fact that Sahel countries have the potential to achieve food security for their populations.

Accordingly, the study addresses the conflicts of interest arising from the region's diverse populations, as well as the long-standing and increasingly severe conflicts that stem from these differences. It also examines the direct and indirect impacts of these conflicts on the food security of millions of people living in the area.

Furthermore, it discusses the effects of extremist groups operating in the region on general human security and food security. The study also identifies the factors that provide the foundation for the 'success' of recruitment efforts by radical groups, which has become a defining feature of the present day.

After reviewing all these aspects, the authors propose initial steps necessary for defining a strategy aimed at establishing food security in the Sahel region.

Key words: Sahel Region, food safety, food security, agropotential, agriculture, migration

Introduction

According to the currently available academic literature, the Sahel region's definition has been interpreted in various ways (geographically, economically, politically, and otherwise). In this paper, we discuss the target countries of the United Nation's assistance plan as part of the Sahel, namely Senegal, Mauritania, Gambia, Guinea, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Nigeria, Chad and Cameroon. The support plan aims to achieve prosperity and sustainable peace in these countries (UN, n.d.). The present study focuses on food security in the zone and its determinants. Since food production is fundamentally determined by geography, it is necessary to define the Sahel region geographically. The Sahel is located in the African continent's central part, forming a transition zone between the Sahara Desert and the more humid subtropical zones. It extends for 5000 km between the west and east coasts of the continent. Its width varies between 500 and 1000 km.

Before the 20th century, the semi-desert was still a natural pasture. However, overgrazing due to population growth led to a decline in vegetation and soil degradation. Ongoing climate change is not sparing the Sahel, which is projected to be more severely affected than other parts of the world (Tesfaye, 2022). And weather anomalies are also increasing the chances of natural disasters.

Food security issues in the Sahel have received global attention in recent years. In addition to climate change and socio-economic problems, all countries in the region are affected by political instability, which increases food insecurity among the population.

Tensions between different regions are an international problem. The conflict in Mali in 2012 led to mass displacement (Refworld, 2012), which in turn led to the creation of refugee camps and slums, which are challenging to care for and maintain even with international intervention.

Food and water insecurity and conflict-induced migration are not just a problem for the Sahel. Migration in the region is on the rise, placing a significant socioeconomic burden on the receiving regions. Tensions arising from cultural and religious differences complicate the social situation.

Therefore, food security is a global goal, and the most pressing challenges are currently in the Sahel. In this chapter, due to space limitations, we focus on the determinants of food security, while water security issues in the Sahel will be addressed in another chapter.

1. Definition, importance, and determinants of food security

Nutrition is a prerequisite for life for all living beings, at base of Maslow's pyramid of needs, followed by everything else that humans need. On this basis, it is alarming that in 2023, more than 733 million people on our planet will lack access to sufficient food, of whom more than 298 million will be in Africa, the majority (more than 277 million) in sub-Saharan Africa. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) 2024 report, the number of undernourished people worldwide decreased between 2010 and 2017 and started to increase again in 2018, while the number of hungry people in Africa has been steadily increasing since 2010 (UNICEF, 2024). Amartya Sen clarified the concept of hunger as early as 1982, stating that hunger is defined as a lack of resources to obtain food, which is not the same as a lack of food (Sen, 1982). In its study of global food problems, the FAO has also concluded that problems in some regions are caused by insufficient access to food, a phenomenon that mainly affects developing countries (Juhász & Kanizsay, 2007).

Definition and pillars of food security

The concept of food security was defined by the FAO at the 1996 World Food Summit as

"Food security exists when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life." (FAO, 1996).

The basic pillars of food security are therefore: accessibility, utilization and stability (Aborisade & Bach, 2014).

Factors affecting food security

Beyond the pillars, food security depends on complex interacting factors. The practical use of environmental conditions is a key issue, but their existence does not guarantee food security. Economic and social conditions are also crucial. According to Mwaniki, food insecurity in developing countries is caused by people's lack of access to food due to poverty (Mwaniki, 2006). The resulting malnutrition affects cognitive development, and there is a strong correlation between malnutrition and under-education (De Muro&Burchi, 2007). Under-education also negatively affects labour market opportunities, thus affecting food security.

A country's food production is fundamentally determined by the development of its agricultural infrastructure, but access to markets is significantly influenced by its political and institutional set-up. In developing countries, an unstable political and social environment, armed conflicts, and the lack of 'good governance' are major contributors to food insecurity (Mwaniki, 2006). The difficult living conditions in rural areas lead to population migration to urban areas. Urbanisation, in turn, increases the

risk of food insecurity, as migration from rural to urban areas is often associated with the abandonment of food production, which in turn leads to chronic food insecurity (Veress et al., 2024). The limited ability of cities to sustain themselves leads to the development of slums on their peripheries, where food is provided to the inhabitants through international aid programmes. This can lead to the development of aid dependency, which causes further severe economic and social burdens. In addition, social desperation and extreme poverty trigger radicalisation processes (Juhász & Szeremley, 2021), which can have unforeseen consequences due to the risk of joining extremist groups.

2. Factors and main challenges affecting food security in the Sahel

2.1. Climate factors, climate change

The Sahel is a transition zone between desert and forest savannah. In the Sahel countries with their desert, grass, bush and forest savannahs, food production is a daily challenge for the population, made even more difficult by the phenomenon of climate change. Poor coping strategies in the face of climate extremes are forcing populations to migrate (Ofoezie, 2022). The poverty of the Sahel is deeply rooted in the historical, geographical, and political factors of the region. The region is considered one where persistent drought and hunger are common phenomena, with farmers constantly struggling to produce food (Mbow et al., 2021). Access to natural resources is significantly affected by climate change. Due to weather anomalies, the region is expected to experience an increasing number of natural disasters, which are expected to increase the vulnerability of the population (Mbaye, 2020). In addition to this, it is important to note that the Sahel region has natural resources that, if managed prudently, offer significant development potential (Mbow et al., 2021). In the following subsection, the potential of agriculture in the Sahel is explored through some specific regions.

2.2. Agricultural potential in the Sahel

This sub-chapter aims to show, through concrete examples, that agriculture in the Sahel region has the potential to develop and improve the food security situation of the region as a whole. Areas such as the 'nut basin' in Senegal, the Mopti region in Mali, and the Maradi region in Niger have fertile soils and a long history of agricultural production, and also have significant potential for development (Mbow, 2021). Due to limitations in scope, this paper will present the agricultural potential of these specific Sahelian regions.

The 'Peanut Basin' in Senegal

The 'peanut basin', named after the peanuts grown there, covers an area of approximately 51,000 km² in the mid-west of Senegal, accounting for about a third of the country's arable land and employing two-thirds of the agricultural workforce.

Peanut farming has a long history and plays a significant economic and cultural role in the lives of the rural population. In the 1960s, peanuts were the traditional and industrial crop that dominated the economy of practically the entire country, accounting for more than 80% of exports, covering about half of the area under cultivation, and employing 87% of the working population. Groundnuts were also a raw material for the oil refining industry. It can therefore be said that the groundnut sector, in addition to its importance in food production, is the region's cash crop. In 2005, Senegal became the world's number one exporter of crude groundnut oil, with 75,000 tonnes of groundnut oil shipped abroad (Georges et al., 2016). The groundnut sector has significant potential, which, if exploited, could contribute greatly to job creation, alleviate poverty in rural areas, and reduce food insecurity. The processing of groundnuts into various finished products can bring significant economic development to the region. Among rural farmers, emphasis could be placed on training in value-added processing methods for groundnuts and on developing various processing technologies. Georges et al. (2016) already pointed out that the lack of these was responsible for 47% of poverty and 57% of food insecurity among smallholder farmers in sub-Saharan Africa, including Senegal (Georges et al., 2016).

In addition to peanuts, several other crops in Senegal are currently neglected despite large-scale investments in rice and maize development, despite their potential as a food source. Examples include millet, fonio, cassava, sorghum, and other high-protein staple foods such as cowpea and mung bean (Mbow, 2021). Agricultural development focused on these crops, combined with the potential of groundnut production - from inputs to procurement to marketing of finished products - can go a long way in ensuring that the country's food insecurity is reduced, and production for export can contribute to food security in other regions of the Sahel.

Mopti region, Mali

One of the areas with the greatest economic potential in the Sahel region is the Mopti region in Mali. It is located at the confluence of the Niger and Bani rivers in the Macina region in the central part of the country. The municipality, known as the 'Mali Basin', was formed on islands of sediment deposited by the two rivers. It is an urban town of great strategic value, a river port as well as a fishing and livestock center. Its geographical location makes it a fertile area, with farmers growing rice, millet, shallots, maize and sorghum (Ba, 2023).

Mali, home to the Mopti region, is essentially an agricultural country, with 80% of the population working in agriculture, a sector that accounts for 45% of the country's GDP. Livestock accounts for 10.8% of GDP and contributes almost 20% of export earnings. Livestock production in the Mopti region accounts for 28% of the national cattle population, 18.5% of the sheep population, and 19% of the goat population (Ba, 2023). However, the activity is far from being seamless in the country, especially in the

Mopti region. In the northern, drier regions of the country, transhumance (a form of pastoralism involving the seasonal movement of livestock to wintering grounds) is practiced in the main (Hellendorff, 2012), while the southern, 'greener', rainier, more fertile regions are used for agriculture, but are also highly sought-after agropastoral areas (Gangneron, 2013). Struggles between herders and farmers over land in the Niger Delta date back centuries, but in recent years these conflicts have become increasingly aggressive (Casey&Knox, 2019), posing a significant security risk. Despite its agricultural potential, Mali also faces serious security challenges (Ba, 2023), as the northern part of the country is the scene of continuous and long-standing clashes between the Malian armed forces and Tuareg rebels organized around the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (Coumaré, 2001). The Azawad region, which includes the cities of Timbuktu, Gao, and Kidal as economic and cultural centers, is adjacent to Mopti.

The ongoing armed conflicts in the area, the presence of groups linked to terrorist organizations in the region, and the several coups and military crises in the country have significantly complicated the situation (Agbeno et al, 2023) and fundamentally determined the potential of the available resources. Conflict resolution is complex and complicated, requiring a system of governance and a citizen-centered approach by the relevant authorities to assess and address the situation (Ba, 2023).

Governments have a vital role to play in any state where there are efficient uses of natural resources. By developing the relevant policies, building the institutional framework, and establishing a prudent legal framework, significant results can be achieved in achieving and stabilizing food security in each country.

Maradi region in Niger

A prime example is the afforestation program in the Maradi region of Niger. The region is one of the areas in the Sahel region that could be a potential natural resource for many countries in the Sahel, where forest management is particularly important (Rabiou et al., 2022), and the Maradi region is a leader in this respect.

The Maradi region covers 41 796 km² and is located in the central-southern part of the Niger Republic. 80% of the population is engaged in agriculture and forestry. The area has significant forests and agro-forestry parks (Rabiou et al., 2022). The forests are not artificially planted, but their establishment requires a high level of human activity. The Maradi region has been the site of the largest afforestation programme in the Sahel region in recent decades. By the end of the 1980s, much of the region's vegetation had disappeared (Toudou, 2020), as trees had previously been systematically cleared for agricultural production. This led to a decline in soil fertility and, at the same time, in crop yields, which contributed greatly to food insecurity. Farmers embarked on a programme of 'replanting', a process which consisted of not

planting trees but protecting and helping the growth of shoots that reappeared in the fields. The method of natural regeneration was initially tried by only a few farmers (Tougiani et al. 2008). The conversion of arable land into open forests, crops sown in rotation among trees (cassava, millet, sorghum, sesame, groundnuts, cowpea, hibiscus) soon provided farmers with food and money (Sendzimir, 2011). In the region, a reforestation programme known as Farmer-Managed Natural Regeneration (FMNR) (Toudou, 2020) has resulted in the planting of 200 million trees in an area of about 5 million hectares (Sendzimir, 2011). Today, the region provides livelihoods for 4.5 million people. The afforestation programme has successfully halted soil degradation through soil stabilisation, improved soil fertility and enabled farmers to grow vegetables for export. Livestock farmers have been able to produce more and better quality fodder and women's time spent collecting firewood has been significantly reduced (Reij&Smale, 2009).

There are conflicts over afforestation and reforestation in the region, arising from disputes over land use rights (Boureima, 2008 and Momale, 2015). The tightening of forest management, Law 2004-040 of 8 June 2004 on the forestry system, seeks to mitigate these conflicts. The law provides local communities with the opportunity to exercise customary rights to use the forests on their lands to meet their needs (Rabiou, 2022). Overall, the reforestation programme in the Maradi region is successful and demonstrates that improving food security in the Sahel is not impossible.

The above are just a few examples that show that the Sahel is capable of development, but this is true in terms of the potential of agriculture. In the following section, other factors affecting the food security of the Sahel are examined.

2.3. Conflicts, political instability, and migration as determinants of food security in the Sahel

As we have shown in previous sections, achieving food security in the Sahel, a region known for famines, is not impossible. In addition to the development potential of each region, we have also referred to the various social conflicts that have a detrimental impact on food security, which can be traced back to long-standing ethnic conflicts and/or resource struggles. In addition, the presence of foreign mercenaries and other international military presence has a significant impact on the security and defence situation in most Sahel countries.

Conflicts and wars have a direct impact on a region's infrastructure and thus on its food security. When critical infrastructure is damaged, food supply chains are disrupted, conditions for food production are compromised, and access to food becomes impeded. In turn, the food crisis leads to the displacement of the region's population (FAO – IFAD – UNICEF – WFP – WHO, 2017). Displacement from rural

areas due to armed conflicts and the food shortages they cause often leads to the permanent depopulation of rural areas, which means the abandonment of food production (Veress et al., 2024). As a result, food insecurity is exacerbated.

Conflicts arising from food insecurity and the food insecurity trap of conflict

This phenomenon is visible in the Sahel. As highlighted in the previous chapter of this study, given the climatic characteristics of the Sahel, including the effects of climate change, it is not a natural phenomenon that tens of millions of people in the region are facing food insecurity. The causes of the growing food insecurity are diverse, including rural-urban tensions, rural-urban migration, persistent ethnic clashes in the region, and the activities of extremist groups in increasingly larger areas, often linked to anti-government activities by minority ethnic groups. A typical example is the cooperation of Tuaregs with extremist armed groups.

The Tuareg are a migratory pastoralist people of Berber origin who lived mainly in Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, Algeria, and Libya. Their discontent began after Mali's independence, due to their exclusion from the country's governance and the new political regime that forced them to settle, abandoning their nomadic lifestyle. The Tuareg rebellion, which continues to this day, is driven by the struggle for the Azawad region. The ongoing clashes between rebel forces and government troops have claimed numerous lives and rendered the living conditions in the region unbearable, forcing thousands of Tuaregs to flee their homes. By early January 2013, more than one hundred thousand Malian refugees were residing in neighboring countries, while an additional nearly 200,000 Malian residents were internally displaced due to the brutal confrontations between the Malian army and the Tuareg rebel organization, the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA) (CRS, 2013).

One of the inevitable consequences of displacement and migration is the cessation of food production in the abandoned areas. This has a dual impact: acute (or, in the case of prolonged conflicts, chronic) food shortages in the displaced regions, as well as significant challenges for the social service infrastructure in the receiving areas, which must accommodate and provide for the incoming population.

In addition to the ongoing conflicts between Tuareg rebels and the government, the activities of extremist groups in the region are exacerbating the already difficult situation in Mali. The country's turbulent situation is being exploited by religiously extremist organizations from the western regions of Africa (International Crisis Group, 2021). Radical terrorist organizations are presenting themselves as defenders of desperate rebel groups and promising them support in changing their situation. Joining extremist groups, radicalization, is a breeding ground for feelings of exclusion, oppression, and abject poverty, as joining a group gives people experiencing hopelessness a sense of belonging and removes the feeling of vulnerability (Juhász

et al., 2021). This is exploited by religious extremist organizations present in the region since 2000, which control a large part of Mali's territory.

In the areas controlled by extremist organizations, it is not uncommon to see forced recruitment into their armies, pressganging 'training' pressganging of child soldiers, looting as well as the rape, and torture of women (Refworld, 2012). It is not surprising, therefore, that in such circumstances, the population, rather than producing food, would choose to flee. The remaining population in Mali has been left virtually without supplies because the extremists have banned international organizations from carrying out any humanitarian activities in the areas under their control.

However, resettling the masses fleeing Mali to neighbouring countries and other government-controlled areas in Mali poses serious challenges, as the social safety net has limited capacity. In addition, Mali's neighbours have their own problems and the provision of care for Mali's refugees is a major challenge. Most African countries are unable to provide adequate health care for their populations, with overcrowded refugee camps and slums lacking the capacity to cater for them, resulting in the emergence of often infectious diseases such as cholera and typhoid, and the death of masses of people. In addition to basic health care, the food supply in refugee camps is virtually entirely dependent on the activities of international aid agencies.

'Resettlement' in refugee camps and slums should be seen as a temporary solution, but even with the continued support of international organizations, Sahel countries hosting refugees are unable to cope. This is due to other aggravating circumstances. Niger, neighbouring Mali, is also severely affected by the conflicts in the Sahel. Niger's entire economy is essentially based on agriculture, which employs the vast majority of the population. The majority of households are subsistence farmers (CIA, 2024), but population growth is reducing the per capita rate of consumption of consumable goods, which means that the rate of food production is lagging behind population growth. In addition, climate change-induced weather anomalies, prolonged droughts and increasing soil erosion are further complicating the situation for agriculture. Like Mali, Niger, which is strategically important from a migration perspective, is also fighting fiercely against the activities of the religious extremist organizations present. religiously extremist groups are most active in the north-western part of the country, bordering Mali and Algeria, but the south-eastern region is also under threat and tension, mainly from Boko Haram and DAESH West Africa Province (ISWAP). Niger, one of the most important uranium ore exporters in the Sahel region (CIA, 2024), suffered a military coup in the summer of 2023, leading to political-economic-social instability and causing serious concern in neighbouring countries. Religiously extremist organizations have a well-established way of exploiting the confusion and grievances of a marginalized minority group in a country, and as their protectors, they recruit new members easily. According to experts, 19

terrorist organizations are operating in Niger, with varying degrees of intensity (Schmid, 2011). In the chaos caused by the anti-government insurgency in Nigeria, banditry is also a significant factor, and the fact that it is not always possible to distinguish between simple banditry and anti-government insurgency is a new and significant problem. A good example of this is the case in Nigeria, where the anti-government organization Mouvement des Nigériens pour la Justice (MNJ), founded in 2007 by the Tuaregs of Niger and recognized by other small tribes in Nigeria, is referred to by the government as a 'band of bandits', despite the failure of the state army to effectively fight them. In 2008, however, the government refused to negotiate with the MNJ leadership (Sehmer&Welsh, 2008).

In fact, the recurring rebellions of the Tuareg ethnic group since apartheid show that the discontent of different ethnic groups living in a minority, unable to assert their rights, can cause conflict on a scale that goes beyond being a localized problem in a particular country. This is particularly the case because extremist groups, which are increasingly active in the central and western regions of the Sahel, are exploiting this very discontent and dissatisfaction. In addition, the fact that a rebel ethnic group, strengthened by terrorist organizations, is joined by other disaffected groups fighting for their rights should be seen as a serious risk factor. The case of the Tuaregs and another local ethnic group, Fulani, who are trying to assert themselves in Mali and Niger, is a case in point. The MNJ, founded by the Tuaregs, was joined by Fulani, who had formed militias and carried out various actions in the Diffa and the Tillaberry region (Sehmer&Welsh, 2008). The inadequacy of governance in North Africa and West Africa has resulted in the presence of al-Qaeda in the I Maghreb (AQIM), the North African branch of al-Qaeda in Niger, which now conducts regular attacks (Thornberry&Levy, 2011). The unrest caused by tribal insurgencies and rebellions, as well as the presence and hostile actions of terrorist organizations, pose an increased security risk, which is a constant challenge for Niger. The turmoil caused by tribal insurgencies and rebellions, as well as the presence and specific actions of terrorist organizations, pose an increased security risk that presents Niger with an ongoing challenge.

In this situation, the government can hardly concentrate on developing the country's economy, even though Niger has huge reserves of important mineral resources such as gold, tin, oil, iron and coal, as well as uranium ore (Go et al., 2016). The development of a mining policy would offer significant opportunities to stabilize the country's economy and, in turn, to create and maintain food security. Theoretically Niger's natural resources could not only ensure food security for its own population but also make it the richest country in the Sahel.

But the prevailing uncertainty in the country is not conducive to foreign investment. Terrorist activities also threaten major projects such as the construction of

the Trans-Saharan gas pipeline linking Nigeria to Europe. The agreement was signed in 2009 between Algeria, Niger and Nigeria. In the northern region of Niger, the Tuareg rebel groups are also present - and, as we have shown, they are engaged in serious cooperative activities with extremist organizations. They have already formulated specific threats against the pipeline in the context of the rejection or inadequate fulfilment of their demands against the state (Augé&Africa, 2010). Such a threat has the effect of preventing potential investments and strategic partnerships from being realized, or investors from initiating new ones. This situation is creating a vicious cycle in the country, which only a complex and sophisticated package of solutions can break. From the development of mining policies to the creation of income-generating opportunities, to the introduction of climate-smart agricultural technologies, to the consideration of the interests of marginalized groups, to the control of banditry and terrorism. The latter is of particular importance, as the presence of extremist groups is both a cause and a consequence of migration and food insecurity. According to the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), in October 2023, 6.3 million people in the region were food insecure, including 1.7 million in Niger (Plan-international, 2023).

In many respects, the problems of the Sahel countries cannot be treated as a matter for that country. One of these aspects is that the geographical distribution of different ethnic groups and tribes has not been taken into account at all in the drawing of artificial state borders, nor do tribes respect state borders (Bassou, 2017), since the same tribe often lives on both sides of a state border with the same customary systems; another important aspect is migration within the Sahel. Chad is perhaps the best example in this context. Although Sudan as a Sahel country will not be discussed in this paper, its mention is inevitable, as the migratory pressures on Chad, which is part of the region, are a consequence of the Darfur conflict and the civil war in Sudan (Besenyő, 2021). Sudanese refugees are largely seeking refuge in Southern Chad. The scale of the migration is such that the country has been forced to develop a plan to facilitate the integration of refugees to avoid placing them in permanent camps (Coulibaly et al., 2024). It is estimated that 910,000 refugees have arrived in Chad since the outbreak of the Sudan crisis, of whom more than 200,000 are Chadian returnees (Reliefweb, 2024). The arrival of masses of refugees from the interior regions and Sudan could lead to the collapse of the country's social services system. The rise in food prices will make it impossible for both the population and refugees to access sufficient quantities and quality of food, a situation that is likely to force them to migrate further. The critical conditions in these cases will favour people smugglers, further increasing the potential for conflict.

The migration crisis facing Chad is only one of the problems facing the country. The humanitarian crisis is further complicated by the political crisis in the country in

early 2024 and the ongoing fight against the terrorist organization Boko Haram, which has spread from neighbouring Nigeria. The country is an active member of the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF), a counter-terrorism alliance aimed at combating the growing terrorism around Lake Chad (Understandingwar, 2024). The Boko Haram is putting the countries around the Lake Chad Basin under extreme pressure by engaging in constant clashes with its rival DAESH West Africa Province (ISWAP) and carrying out large-scale attacks on civilians (Understandingwar, 2024). The constant threat of terrorism forces the population to flee and migrate, thus contributing greatly to the development and maintenance of food insecurity.

In Nigeria, the government has been trying to eradicate Boko Haram's activities since May 2013, and although the methods are secret (Besenyő&Mayer, 2015), at the end of 2024, we cannot yet speak of their 'success', as Boko Haram continues to carry out actions against the civilian population (Understandingwar, 2024). The organization has become notorious for assassinations and mass kidnappings, most often targeting women and children. Even with the threat of terrorism, Africa's most populous country faces serious challenges. The country's population is growing by leaps and bounds (World Bank, 2023), putting a heavy strain on basic infrastructure - including food supply.

Nigeria's urbanization is driven by differences in living standards between rural and urban regions, as people move from rural to urban areas for better living conditions. There is considerable communal competition for resources, with serious tensions between urban and rural regions. This is exacerbated by the fact that, in the absence of urban development plans, illegal constructions are springing up, with all the consequences that entail (Obi-Ani&Isiani, 2020), ethnic clashes between migrant herders and farmers are also manifestations of the struggle for resources (Fasona&Omojola, 2005), even though Nigeria has cheap natural gas and oil reserves, and the potential for food production for export. Nigeria is not self-sufficient in food, despite its high agropotential, Nigeria relies heavily on food imports (Ahungwa et al., 2014). While the potential for development is there, other conditions hinder the achievement of food security. However, improving living conditions could reduce urbanization and the pressure it puts on critical infrastructure and also increase food production. To this end, it is proposed to develop policies and rural development programmes that increase the availability of arable land and rehabilitate degraded land. Ethnic conflicts and communal clashes should be reduced, taking into account the millennia-old way of life of the ethnic groups, ensuring that itinerant pastoralism does not harm farmers' interests. To this end, consideration should be given to the introduction of intensive pastoral development programmes that can help reduce the amount of land used for transhumance (Fasona&Omojola, 2005).

In Nigeria, conflicts of interest over land use are also a major problem. The southern mangrove swamp zone of the Niger Delta consists of permanently flooded wetlands where fishing is the main occupation. But the region is also a zone of commercial oil exploration. This is in clear contrast to the agricultural use of the available land, with oil spills from drilling, earthworks and the dredging of canals threatening the fishing activities of the local population. The conflict could be reduced through rational land use resource planning, aimed at exploring local coastal resources to provide livelihood opportunities for local populations in areas where the ecological risks associated with oil are lower (Fasona&Omojola, 2005). This, of course, requires knowledge of and consideration for the culture, the long-standing traditions and the way of life of local populations.

Summary and proposals

Food security in the countries of the Sahel region is facing significant challenges arising from complex environmental, social and political factors. The region's climate is extremely dry and variable, which has a major impact on agricultural production. While there is the potential for agricultural development in some countries such as Mali, Nigeria, Niger and Senegal, there are significant obstacles to exploiting this potential, mainly in the area of security.

In the Sahel region, millennia-old conflicts between farmers and pastoralists, oppressed ethnic groups and governments have become increasingly serious. The presence of religiously extremist organizations exacerbates these tensions, often acting as defenders of socially excluded groups, providing them with weapons and ideological support. This leads to increasingly aggressive armed conflicts, which have triggered mass migration and exacerbated food insecurity. The social systems in refugee-affected regions are unable to cope with the increasing burden, with social care systems on the verge of collapse.

Rural areas paradoxically have lower levels of food security, because subsistence farming often does not provide sufficient food and income. Livelihood difficulties lead many people to migrate to urban areas, but their infrastructure, labour market and social networks are unable to absorb the influx, leading to slum formation and crime.

The international military presence, the growing presence of religiously extremist organizations with modern weapons in increasing numbers and over larger areas, and the ethnic uprisings and insurgencies that are causing increasingly serious conflicts have a real impact on food security in the Sahel countries. Food insecurity is clearly linked to migration, and the burden of food insecurity is not only felt within the zone, but will soon spread beyond its borders, and even beyond the borders of the continent as a whole, if no appropriate measures are taken. In the context of

emigration, the smuggling of human beings in support of irregular migration is growing into a 'thriving business', the eradication of which is a challenge at the international level.

Conflicts, in particular ethnic-based insurgencies and the spread of religiously extremist organizations, pose a security risk to both stability and food security in the region. In many cases, governments underestimate these insurgencies, describing them as banditry instead of seeing the real problems, further fuelling discontent and increasing tensions. Climate change exacerbates the obstacles to exploiting the region's agricultural potential. Weather anomalies are causing significant production losses, directly threatening food security. At the same time, the region is rich in mineral resources, but in the absence of appropriate mining and external policy strategies, these resources remain unexploited.

In order to improve food security, it is essential to conduct a comprehensive, on-the-ground assessment that takes into account all relevant factors, including millennia-old traditions, ethnic specificities and the potential for exploiting agropotential. Rural development is key to sustainable food production and to reducing emigration.

A comprehensive, all-encompassing field study of the region by an international research team is needed, with a timeframe of at least one growing cycle, given the need to examine food production potential and food security components. The research should cover political, economic, cultural, religious, health, educational and other social and environmental characteristics. The research team needs to be based in the field and for the research team to be composed of at least 50% local experts. The team members should come from the fields of management and organization, safety, social sciences, and it is necessary and recommended to involve international and local educational institutions, NGOs, professional colleges and churches as collaborating partners. The comprehensive study carried out by an international research team could form the basis for the development of concrete action plans to promote the achievement and stabilization of food security in the individual countries and the Sahel region as a whole. Given that the study reflects the situation over some time, continuous monitoring, regular updating of data and analysis of the impact of events in the region are essential for the relevance of the programmes and projects to be implemented.

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PART III: REGIONAL SECURITY CHALLENGES

CHAPTER 16

Terrorist and Counter-Terrorist Activities in the Sahel

Abstract

In this chapter we will delve deeper into the security situation in the Sahel from the perspective of terrorist and counter-terrorist activities. Our aim is to provide a brief historical background into what led to the current situation in which countries like Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger are being virtually overrun by religiously motivated violence. Multiple actors are at play in the Sahel, for our research we will focus on the three major religiously motivated factions in the region, being al-Qaeda affiliate Jama'a li-Nusra al-I wa'l-M (JNIM) and the two DAESH branches operating in Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, and Nigeria; DAESH in Sahel Province (ISSP) and DAESH in Western Africa Province (ISWAP).

In the first section we will briefly explore the history of religiously motivated terrorism in Northern and Western Africa and how it gradually gained ground throughout the entire Sahel. We will look into how the brutal conflict in Algeria with the Groupe l Armé (GIA) evolved into a continuous presence of al-Qaeda's branch in the Maghreb (AQIM – al-Qaeda in the l Maghreb) and eventually led to the creation of the sub-branch JNIM, dedicated to so-called conflict in the Sahel. During the heyday of the DAESH in Syria and Iraq, the group adopted the policy of creating local Wilayat or provinces in areas around the world prone to fall to radical salafi insurgency; thus, first ISWAP was created, later to be followed by DAESH in the Greater Sahel (ISGS) which later rebranded as ISSP. If we look at the sharp increase of the radical salafi insurgency throughout the region, it is crucial to focus on both al-Qaeda and DAESH.

We will analyze how the military coups in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger further destabilised the area and how the putschist regimes choose isolationism by rejecting all Western interference. Since France's operations in Mali were ended on the military junta's request, the security situation quickly deteriorated. When the regime subsequently ended all cooperation with the UN operation in the area, the Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) the security gap was too great to fill, so Russian mercenaries of the Wagner Group (currently known as the Russian Army Africa Corps) were hired. Their presence however only pulled Mali deeper into the quagmire. When the neighbouring countries Burkina Faso and

Niger also overthrew their democratically elected regimes for a military takeover, the religious extremist flood could no longer be stopped.

In a concluding section we will assess the current security situation in the Sahel based on a database of around 1530 statements, picture or video reports published by JNIM, ISSP and ISWAP during 19 consecutive months (December 2022 – June 2024). We will try to look ahead to what may be the future evolution of the religious extremist conflict wrecking Western-Africa and try to answer one of the most difficult questions in this regard; what may be potential policy recommendations for the EU, the UN and others in an attempt to ultimately contain this conflict before it affects regional and global security.

Keywords: Sahel, terrorism, JNIM, DAESH, ISSP, ISWAP, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Nigeria

Religiously motivated terrorism in the Sahel – History and Background

Religious extremism is deeply rooted in Northern Africa. It started in 1991 when democratic elections in Algeria brought a Salafist faction to power in the first round of parliamentary elections, a result that was heavily disputed from the very first day. The I Relief Front (*Front I du Salut* or FIS) won the elections, possibly opening the gates for Salafi inspired governance throughout Algeria and eventually the entire northern part of the African continent.

On January 11, 1992, the Algerian army ousted the president, suspended the electoral process, and installed their own regime. The subsequent civil war would last for over a decade. Only on February 8, 2002, the situation returned to what could be described as “more or less normal”. (Hafez, 2000) This decade, in Algeria referred to as ‘the Black Decade’ (العشرية السوداء in Arabic or *la Décennie noire* in French), witnessed unseen brutality against civilians and journalists: total fatalities have been estimated to reach from 44.000 to over 200.000. Not surprising the period also gained the nickname *la sale guerre*, “the dirty war” (Willis, 2014; Hafez, 2000).

One original sub faction of FIS, “the Armed I Group” (*Groupe I Armé* or GIA), radical hardliners mainly operating in the cities of Algeria’s north adhered to a Salafi ideology and in 1994 started a bloody war with its mother organisation FIS, under the motto “no agreement, no truce, no dialogue”. (Martinez, 2000) New elections in 1995 led to an intensification of the conflict leading to a series of massacres that culminated in 1997. Only in 1999 with the election of Abdelaziz Bouteflika did the tide turned for the better, leading to amnesty laws for former insurgents. GIA slowly disintegrated and had almost completely disappeared by 2002 (Willis, 2014). One splinter faction the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat - GSPC (الجماعة السلفية للدعوة والقتال in Arabic or *Groupe Salafiste pour la Prédication et le Combat* in French) remained. In October

2003 the GSPC joined al-Qaeda and in 2007 finally rebranded as AQIM (al-Qaeda in the I Maghreb - تنظيم القاعدة في بلاد المغرب الإسلامي in Arabic). It is one of the sub factions of AQIM that is now wreaking havoc in the Sahel (Harmon, 2014).

JNIM (*Jama'at Nusrat al-I wa'l-M - جماعة نصرة الإسلام والمسلمين*) was founded in 2017 as the al-Qaeda franchise operating in the Sahel. Since its inception the group, together with two so-called provinces of DAESH (ISSP and ISWAP) are responsible for the overall majority of religious extremist attacks in the Sahel. At first it was mainly Mali that was afflicted by the violence spreading from Algeria but since 2019 the security situation in all surrounding countries has been affected (Counter Extremism Project, n.d.).

On March 2, 2017, Iyad Ag Ghaly, the leader of religious extremist faction al-Murabitoun announced the merger of several other groups under the overarching project JNIM. He pledged allegiance to al-Qaeda In the I Maghreb (AQIM) and started waging a local insurgency in Mali and Burkina Faso, two countries riddled by internal divides and social and political unrest for years. From 2017 to 2023, JNIM was responsible for more than half of violent events across the Sahel region, notably due to increased capabilities in the use of roadside bombs, mortars, landmines, and rockets. It had its most violent interactions with Burkina Faso's and Malian military forces (Counter Extremism Project, n.d.; Thurston, 2020).

Probably the biggest regional threat are the two branches of DAESH currently active throughout the Sahel. The first group to emerge, ISWAP (DAESH in West-Africa) has its roots in a local religiously motivated rebellion in the area, commonly known as Boko Haram. Boko Haram, officially known as "Jamā'at Ahl as-Sunnah lid-Da'wah wa'l-J (*The Sunni People's Group for Da'wa and J* - Arabic: جماعة أهل السنة للدعوة والجهاد) was founded in 2002. Since 2009 the group had been under the leadership of the psychopathic warlord, Abubakar Shekau. On March 7, 2015, Shekau pledged allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the first leader of DAESH (Zenn, 2020).

ISWAP suffered significant losses and lost a lot of land previously occupied due to increasing attacks from the Multinational Joint Task Force (MJTF). This was a combined multinational formation, comprising units, mostly military, from Benin, Cameroon, Chad, Niger, and Nigeria. It was headquartered in N'Djamena and was mandated to bring an end to the Boko Haram insurgency. Discontent grew among the ranks with Shekau. Despite orders by DAESH's central command to stop using women and children as suicide bombers as well as to refrain from mass killings of civilians, Shekau refused to change his tactics and DAESH ultimately broke with him. As Dr. Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi described the situation; the Boko Haram leader proved to be "*too extreme even by DAESH's standards*" (Al-Tamimi, 2018). In August 2016, DAESH appointed Abu Musab al-Barnawi as the leader of the group instead of Shekau, but the latter refused to recognise al-Barnawi's authority and split off part of

the group. Hence the group split into a faction led by Shekau (Boko Haram) and another one led by al-Barnawi (ISWAP). It didn't take long before both factions started clashing violently and over time ISWAP became the more powerful of the factions. In May 2021, fighting between ISWAP and Boko Haram escalated. ISWAP invaded Sambisa Forest, Boko Haram's stronghold, and encircled Shekau on May 19. ISWAP attempted to convince Shekau to surrender and acknowledge al-Barnawi's authority, but the Boko Haram leader refused. In the middle of the negotiations, Shekau used a suicide vest to kill himself and a senior ISWAP leader conducting the negotiations (BBC News, 2021).

The other DAESH branch in the Sahel was founded on May 15, 2015, as the result of a split within the militant group al-Mourabitoun. From March 2019 to 2022, DAESH in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) was formally part of ISWAP. In March 2022, DAESH's central command declared the province autonomous, separating it from its West Africa Province and naming it DAESH Sahel Province (ISSP). Although Mali is the centre of operations for ISSP, it quickly spread towards neighbouring countries Niger and Burkina Faso. From 2022 onward ISGS made significant territorial gains throughout Mali: the country now faces not only the Azawad rebellion in the north but is also under continuous attacks by ISSP and JNIM (ACLED, 2024; Van Ostaeyen, 2023).

Western Operations in the Sahel – Coups and Consequences

Although the region and particularly Mali have been plagued by religiously motivated violence from both al-Qaeda and DAESH affiliates, it is by far not the only issue the local regimes are facing. In January 2012 a civil war started in Mali, quickly dividing the north from the south. In the north the local Tuareg tribes united their forces under the umbrella of the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad with as its main purpose the creation of an independent Tuareg state in northern Mali. The civil divide and social unrest quickly led to a military putsch in which President Amadou Touré was ousted. On March 22, 2012, he was finally toppled: the consequences were severe, and amidst the chaos the northern rebellion took control over the three major cities in the north, Kidal, Gao, and Timbuktu (Keenan, 2013). In the aftermath of the chaos several religious extremist factions, affiliated with al-Qaeda imposed its so-called religious law in the conquered areas. The new Malian government saw itself obligated to call on the former colonial power France for military assistance to drive back the insurgency.

On January 11, 2013, France began its first military operation in Mali, Operation Serval. Forces from the African Union also joined the battle and by February 8 most of the areas under insurgents' control were liberated. Mid 2014 Operation Serval came to an end and was replaced by the multilateral counterterrorist operation, Barkhane (Dorsey, 2019). These were not the only operations in which a coalition of European

and international forces cooperated in an attempt to quell a mainly religiously motivated rebellion. The United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (French: *Mission Multidimensionnelle Intégrée des Nations Unies pour la Stabilisation au Mali*, MINUSMA) was by far the most important United Nations peacekeeping mission in Mali. MINUSMA was established on 25 April 2013 by the United Nations Security Council to stabilise the country after the Tuareg rebellion of 2012 and was terminated over a decade later on 30 June 2023 (United Nations Security Council, 2013; United Nations Peacekeeping, 2023).

Another operation set up by the European Union was EUTM Mali (European Training Mission in Mali), an operation in which no less than 22 EU countries and 4 non-EU countries contributed. In a one-decade timespan from January 2013 to May 2024 this multi-lateral force was responsible for the training of several hundred Malian forces (European Union External Action, 2024). Other operations, mainly under French command, were firstly the Takuba Task Force (March 2020 – June 2022), an operation established to advise, assist, and accompany the Malian army during operations in an attempt to quell the religiously motivated insurgency. Another example was the Belgian operation New Nero in Niger, a bilateral mission in which Belgian Special Forces trained the Nigerien Army (French Ministry of Armed Forces, 2022; Belgian Ministry of Defence, 2021).

All these operations ended quickly after Mali was plagued again by a succession of military coups. In August 2020, President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta was removed from power by a group of military officers. After several months of unrest following irregularities in the March and April parliamentary elections and outrage against the kidnapping of an opposition leader, less than nine months later the third coup in under ten years followed; on the night of 24 May 2021 the Malian Army led by Vice President Assimi Goïta captured the President, the Prime Minister, and the Minister of Defence. Assimi Goïta, the head of the junta that led the 2020 Malian coup d'état, announced that the President and Prime Minister were stripped of their powers and that new elections would be held in 2022 (Human Rights Watch, 2023). The United Nations, ECOWAS (*The Economic Community of Western African States*), the European Union, the United States and the African Union issued a joint statement condemning the coup. Europe and the US even threatened to impose sanctions on Mali's new rulers.

On February 17 2022, French President Emmanuel Macron issued an official statement terminating all military operations in Mali

“Due to multiple obstructions by the Malian transitional authorities (...) Canada and the European States operating alongside Operation Barkhane and within the Task Force Takuba deem that the political, operational and legal conditions are no longer met to effectively continue their current military engagement in

the fight against terrorism in Mali and have thereof decided to commence the coordinated withdrawal of their respective military resources dedicated to these operations from Malian territory.” (Présidence de la République, 2022)

All signatories expressed their willingness to stay involved in the region, but only MINUSMA stayed in place. On 16 June 2023, the Foreign Minister of Mali requested that the United Nations terminate MINUSMA due to what he called its "failure" to stabilize the situation there. The mission was officially terminated on 30 June 2023, with all UN forces due to leave Mali by 31 December 2023 (United Nations Security Council, 2023).

Burkina Faso also suffered two military coups, the first in January 2022, to be followed later that year by the September coup d'état. On January 23, 2022, Burkinabe President Kabouré was ousted in a mutiny in Ouagadougou's army barracks (BBC News, 2022). After the arrest of the president, the government, the parliament and the constitution were dissolved. Power was taken over by a military junta led by Lieutenant Colonel Paul-Henri Damiba. On 31 January, the military junta restored the constitution and appointed Damiba as interim president (BBC News, 2022). But Damiba's rule was unpopular and lasted only 8 months, until he himself was deposed in the subsequent coup d'état in September 2022. After the first coup the African Union and ECOWAS suspended their cooperation with the new military leaders. On 30 September 2022, self-appointed Interim President Damiba was dismissed over his alleged inability to deal with the religiously motivated insurgency (Al-Jazeera, 2022).

Captain Ibrahim Traoré took over as interim leader, but the desperate situation was only exacerbated as it came amidst a push by Russia to increase their influence in the Sahel region. One of the most influential outside actors proved to be the Wagner Group, later to be called the Russian Army Africa Corps. It is believed that the Russians interfered significantly in the events that led to both coups. The relationship with former colonial powers, especially France, deteriorated rapidly under Russian influence and eventually the French also left Burkina Faso to the mercy of local insurgents and Russian mercenaries. On February 19, 2023, France officially terminated its military presence in the country after Traoré had given them a one-month deadline to completely withdraw from the country (France 24, 2023). Henceforth the security situation quickly deteriorated as will be discussed later on.

Another pivotal point of focus for shifting power in the wider Sahel region is Niger, another country that was the subject of successive of military coups. On March 31, 2021, military forces of an Air Force unit in the capital Niamey tried to sabotage the upcoming instalment of newly elected President Mohamed Bazoum. The rebellion was easily subdued however and those behind were it arrested (France24, 2021). On July 26, 2023, the curtain did fall for President Bazoum as Presidential Guard commander General Abdourahamane Tchiani proclaimed himself the leader of a new

military junta (Reuters, 2023). In 2022, the country had become the hub of France's anti-terrorist operations in the Sahel region following its expulsion from Mali and Burkina Faso, with Bazoum being described as one of the few remaining pro-Western leaders in the region. Niger became a key ally for Western powers, particularly French, American and Turkish forces.

With multiple coups and rising anti-French sentiments in the region, Niger became France's partner of last resort. But to no avail, the Russian influence had grown too strong. French President Macron saw himself obliged to start the withdrawal of all French military forces in the country by the end of 2023. As before, in Mali and Burkina Faso, ECOWAS and the African Union not only strongly condemned the coup, but they also terminated their co-operation with Niger. When Bazoum fell, it eventually led to the termination of all Western backed military operations, among the first to leave were the French and Belgian forces, later to be followed by the American forces who saw themselves obliged to leave their multi-million-dollar airbase in Agadez (The Guardian, 2024). On March 16, 2024, the Nigerien junta declared on national television that the American presence in the country was no longer required, also declaring that American operations in the country to be illegal and demanded their immediate withdrawal from the country.

All of this combined together – the combination of ever increasing, highly organised religiously motivated violence, military coups destabilising the entire region, civil war and local unrest, the ousting of Western troops and the warm welcome given to the Russian Africa Corps – drew the entire region into a spiral of seemingly never-ending religiously motivated violence from late 2022 onward, as we will discuss in the following section.

Religiously Motivated Violence in the Sahel – Current Events

In December 2022 we started monitoring religiously motivated media output concerning the Sahel. Our research entailed the collection and translation of every single media event published by JNIM, ISWAP and ISSP for a period of 19 consecutive months. When we recently concluded this research after the collection of nearly 1530 statements published by az-Zallaqa Media (JNIM's media branch) and Nashir News (DAESH's media channel), we ended up with a total of 82 weekly translation files and 19 monthly analytical reports. This section will be based entirely on our research, of which the monthly results are openly accessible via the website of the Counter Extremism Project.

When we started our research in December 2022 only 38 claims of religiously motivated incidents were published. The number gradually rose over the course of the months that followed, with the number of claimed incidents (statements, pictures, videos) rising to over 151 in the month of May 2024, marking a rise of religiously

motivated messaging activity of nearly 400%. Among some of the most remarkable observations we were able to make during this timeframe are: firstly, that ISSP drastically underreports its claims; secondly, JNIM became the predominant religiously motivated group operating throughout the region; thirdly, the conflict rapidly spread beyond Nigeria, Mali, Burkina Faso to Cameroon, Togo and Benin; and above all how the coups and their consequences (including the ever-increasing local foothold of Russia's Africa Corps and the departure of Western led-troops) impacted the overall security situation throughout the entire Sahel.

Up till Ramadan 1444 A.H. which roughly coincided with April 2023, activity stayed rather low, yet the number of claims slowly rose to an average of 50 incidents per month. Overall, the trend during these first months of close monitoring was that overall ISWAP claimed the most incidents, followed by JNIM; ISSP always lagged seriously behind in the number of claims. The impact of most ISWAP attacks was relatively low, mainly resulting in a handful of killed or wounded Nigerien soldiers.

In February 2023, it became increasingly clear that the Russian mercenaries of the Wagner Group rapidly gaining impact on a strategic and military level, and at the expense of Western forces who were gradually removed from the area by the putschist regimes (Van Ostaeyen, 2023). In February 2023 Burkina Faso was the second country in the Sahel that ended cooperation with France and other Western peacekeepers, as reported by VOA News: *"France and Burkina Faso have officially marked the end of French military operations in the West African nation, the Burkinabe armed forces said Sunday, after a flag-lowering ceremony at the French special forces' camp a day earlier"* (VOA News, 2023). In May 2023 German troops deployed in Mali also started withdrawing from MINUSMA as the operations had been hampered by disputes with Bamako and the arrival of Russian forces (Al-Jazeera, 2023).

In May 2023 we first noticed a slight geographical shift in attacks. The number of claimed terror attacks dropped in Nigeria; however, it remained the most affected country in the region. On the other hand, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Cameroon saw a steady increase in claimed attacks since March 2023. Nigeria remained the country with the highest number of claimed attacks. Four of these attacks were targeting the African Union Forces MNJTF in the area of Borno. Furthermore, ISWAP claimed four different suicide attacks in the region of Lake Chad during the second week of May. We also noticed a sharp increase of infighting between JNIM and ISSP both in Mali and in Burkina Faso (Van Ostaeyen, 2023).

From June 2023 onward we added a first possible trendline based on the statistical models available in Microsoft Office Excel. It presented us with the foresight of possibly more than 100 claimed incidents by the beginning of 2024 (see table 1- *expected claims up till January 2024*). Due to the deteriorating situation throughout the

entire Sahel and growing concern in Belgian Defence a colonel (OF-5) in Belgian Staff services said in an anonymous interview;

"If we want to tackle this, we need a lot more people and resources and a different approach to development cooperation. We've been saying that for years, but it's not going to happen. No people, no resources and development cooperations are still giving money without questioning whether the money is being used effectively. (...) This will come back to us like a boomerang. Extra migrants at the door if the Sahel falls and extra attacks are unavoidable." (Van Ostaeyen, 2023)

The most impactful event in the summer of 2023 was the military coup in Niger in which President Mohamed Bazoum was sequestered by his own presidential guard, after which the military claimed control over the country, closed the airspace and borders, and ordered all foreign forces to leave. (The New York Times, 2023). It also gradually became clear why ISSP continued to underreport its own actions in the Sahel. As Dr. Haid Haid of The Chatham House remarked in The Arab Weekly (2023) that:

"...The notion that DAESH under-reports for security reasons the attacks it carries out is not new, another set of DAESH documents, allegedly leaked and published by an anti-DAESH outlet, further support this claim, indicating that it is not merely a self-serving narrative. The leaked documents provide valuable insights into the decision-making behind claiming certain attacks and not others, as well as the resulting internal tensions within the group. It also shows that analysts solely relying on the number of claimed attacks will not get an accurate measure of a militant group's strength."

Although Dr. Haid's remarks were made in the context of DAESH Central Command in Syria and Iraq it is safe to assume that this same communication strategy was followed by other DAESH branches as well, and above all ISSP.

In late summer 2023 the so-called leader of DAESH, Abu al-Husayn al-Husayni al-Qurashi, who had led DAESH for a mere 150 days, was officially proclaimed killed. His successor, Abu Hafs al-Hashimi al-Qurashi, was announced to have taken over in an audio message spread by al-Furqan, DAESH's central media apparatus, on August 3. Quickly after the dissemination of the announcement, on August 5, the round of pledges of allegiance (*bay'a*) from DAESH cells and "provinces" began. Notably, after photos of fighters pledging *bay'a* was sent from DAESH-core in Iraq, ISWAP swiftly followed. While images from Iraq showed only a few small cells, the first pictures of a *bay'a* ceremony from ISWAP showed an impressive display of power. ISWAP showcased dozens of men, all well-armed and wearing military fatigues, to give the impression that ISWAP runs a professional army. ISSP fighters on the other hand did

not wear uniforms, they were featured on motorcycles in pairs. The image conveyed that ISSP commands a large number of rapid intervention units, consisting out of loosely coordinated cells. In addition to the propaganda output from ISWAP and ISGS, there were *bay'a* messages from Somalia, Central-Africa, and Mozambique (though, interestingly not from Libya or Sinai). The message, DAESH was propagating was clear: Africa became the new epicenter of their fight. (Van Ostaeyen, 2023)

Furthermore, the impact of the withdrawal of Western troops and the drawing down of MINUSMA had a clear effect, shown in the rising number of claimed attacks. In August 2023, the number of claimed attacks in Mali and Niger were the highest since reporting started in December 2022. Other trends observed in late summer 2023 were the increasing number of casualties in infighting between JNIM and ISSP throughout the region and increasing attacks by ISWAP on Christian villages in Nigeria. ISSP meanwhile became more and more engaged in implementing its so-called religious penal law (Hudud, Ta'zir and Qisas). Throughout Mali, ISSP meted out so-called Hudud punishments in public on at least six different occasions. All of these events featured in the group's propaganda outputs, sending a clear message to the local population as well as its wider circle of sympathizers that DAESH was now building its new state. Most important was the public call for a general mobilization for the fight against the Malian army and the Wagner Group, published by az-Zallaqa Media on behalf of JNIM on August 21. (Van Ostaeyen, 2023)

Around this time JNIM increased its activities, not only military but also attempting to portray itself as the 'defender' of the local population. The fact that the group openly condemned several brutal attacks by the army and the Wagner Group and issued a call for general mobilization in Mali is telling. All of these actions are part of its strategy of winning hearts and minds and build further local support. DAESH, however, follows a different strategy. Once the group is sufficiently entrenched in an area it immediately begins imposing the most extremist implementation of religious law. DAESH's strategy is rule through fear among the local population rather than compassion. Therefore, the emphasis in ISSP propaganda of public punishments in August indicates that the terror group felt sufficiently in control and entrenched in the areas it controls and no longer feared popular discontent to its harsh rule. (Van Ostaeyen, 2023)

In September 2023 JNIM and ISSP reached some kind of cease-fire that freed up resources of both terrorist networks devoted against Malian security forces and Wagner troops. Both terrorist groups seemingly started dividing Mali into distinct operational zones. Meanwhile the military coup in Niger and the withdrawal of French and other Western forces from the country and the suspension of EU security cooperation meant that a key regional security hub stemming terrorist violence was no longer operational. This security vacuum has since been continuously filled by the

Wagner Group / Africa Corps, which kept on increasing its footprint in the region. By October the Malian army was fighting on several fronts at once; in the north the former MINUSMA base at Kidal was taken over by the Azawad rebellion. Gao, the largest city in northern Mali was blockaded by JNIM, while some 320 km west the group tried to completely cut off the historic city of Timbuktu in the north of the country, preventing supplies reaching the city. The blockade of the two cities came as competing forces in Mali scrambled to fill the security vacuum caused by the departure of international troops. (Van Ostaeyen, 2023)

By the end of 2023 the situation looked grim as the overall destabilisation of the region provided a fertile ground for terrorist groups to grow and expand their operational areas. The withdrawal of Western and UN forces from the region left a security vacuum, while the entry of Russian mercenary forces exacerbated radicalization in the region. Three states, Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, experienced military coups, and concomitant political instability. In all three countries, terrorist violence increased following these coups. (Van Ostaeyen, 2024)

In March 2024 American military forces were being forced out of Niger, the site of one of their most important airbases in northern Africa; on March 16, a spokesman of the military junta in Niger denounced the military agreement with the USA after accusing it of *“illegal activity in the country and false accusations of a uranium deal with Iran”* (Nasr, 2024). Western forces were demanded to leave by the new-ruling military regimes in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger and have been gradually replaced by Russia's Africa Corps. Rather than a replacement for counter-terrorism operations, the combination of local security forces and Russian mercenaries become regularly involved in random attacks and massacres of the local population, under the pretext of controlling religiously motivated-terrorist uprisings. These attacks on local populations are also exploited by terrorist propaganda by JNIM and mostly claims like these have been confirmed by independent research done by Human Rights Watch (HRW, 2024). By the end of spring 2024 it became all too clear that once what were DAESH and al-Qaeda local strongholds had developed into much larger, quasi-permanent areas of control. (Van Ostaeyen, 2024)

Over time an increasing number of statements were published by JNIM accusing the Malian army, the Russian Africa Corps (the former Wagner Group) and the Burkinabe army of committing atrocities among the local population. Time and again JNIM presents itself as the protector of the local communities. Indeed, independent research by Human Rights Watch in late March seems to confirm that the military regimes in Mali and Burkina Faso, with the support of Russian mercenaries, have committed atrocities against civilians:

“Mali’s Russia-backed transitional military government is not only committing horrific abuses, but it is working to eliminate scrutiny into its human rights situation.” (Associated Press, 2024)

In April 2024 no less than seven countries throughout the Sahel and Western-Africa were affected by the religiously motivated insurgency; Mali, Nigeria, Burkina Faso, Niger, Cameroon, Togo, and Benin suffered claimed religious extremist attacks. DAESH realised the chaos was so complete it could easily implement its core strategy of mass recruitment and proselytization. In what might turn out to be the largest coordinated transnational DAESH ideological operation yet, during an operation of *Hisba* (Moral Police), the group distributed 27,000 pamphlets among the population in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso. (Van Ostaeyen, 2024)

The situation kept on deteriorating as ISWAP increased its attacks on the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and African Coalition Forces. No less than ten attacks on the Red Cross and the African Coalition Forces were registered in May. But Mali suffered the brunt of the insurgency, as VOA News reported:

“Save the Children says more than 140,000 people in the Malian town of Menaka, including 80,000 children, face malnutrition and disease due to a blockade by DAESH-linked insurgents. The organization warns that the months-long blockade has driven supplies to alarmingly low levels as aid agencies and Malian government programs struggle to deliver basic necessities (....) The blockade in Menaka follows a siege in Timbuktu that began last August and has trapped more than 136,000 people, 74,000 of them children.” (VOA News, 2024)

All of this is causing a rapidly increasing number of people internally displaced, and/or trying to flee to Europe by crossing the Atlantic from Mauritania to the Canary Islands. This situation is increasingly challenging for authorities in tourist destinations such as Tenerife and Gran Canaria. The continuing rise of the number of terrorist operations is extremely concerning and indicative of a rapidly deteriorating security situation. Burkina Faso is on the brink of collapse; Mali is following quickly. Furthermore, there are clear indications that religiously motivated terrorist groups in the Sahel are continuing efforts to expand into countries currently less affected by terrorist violence, something that has been confirmed as recently as October 22, 2024, when az-Zallaqa Media published a video with one of JNIM’s leaders, Mohamed Koufa, answering an interview request from French journalist Wassim Nasr. (Nasr, 2024 - Van Ostaeyen, 2024)

Another element pointing to increasing activity by JNIM throughout the region was the massacre committed by JNIM in the Burkinabe town of Barsalogo on August

24, 2024. According to Human Rights Watch, at least 133 civilians were brutally killed, but the number of victims likely exceeds 300, as reported earlier by The Telegraph (2024). Mali also suffered deadly violence unleashed by the al-Qaeda affiliate. On September 17, 2024, two attacks in the capital of Bamako claimed at least 80 victims. But Bamako already faced a bigger challenge. On July 25, 2024, Touareg rebels of the CSP-DPA (Cadre stratégique pour la défense du peuple de l'Azawad) attacked a convoy of the Malian army and the Wagner Group near Tinzaouten, close to the Algerian border. Completely overwhelmed, the convoy returned to base, only to be subsequently attacked by JNIM. Footage released by CSP and JNIM shows multiple corpses of killed Russians, Malian soldiers, and destroyed vehicles. The exact number of casualties was not disclosed by the Russian mercenaries or the Malian army, but CSP sources claimed 84 Russians and 47 Malian soldiers were killed. JNIM claimed to have additionally killed 50 Russians and 10 Malian servicemen. The battle ended two days later, on July 27, 2024, with a major defeat for the Malian army and the Russian mercenaries. (Van Ostaeyen, 2024)

Conclusion

In addition to the rising levels of religiously motivated terrorism and government orchestrated violence, *Da'wa* (proselytization) campaigns and the application of so-called religious law on local communities by both al-Qaeda and DAESH continues to increase. Therefore, all religiously motivated terrorist factions throughout the Sahel continue their slow but steady state-building project. It is only a matter of time before one or more of the dominos may fall, likely leading to the complete or partial collapse of countries such as Mali, Burkina Faso or Niger. The security situation in the Sahel region might deteriorate further. If current trends are not significantly and sustainably reversed, it is very possible that by June 2025 the number of terrorist incidents in the region could exceed 250 incidents per month. Religiously motivated terrorist violence has only increased since the military coups in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. It is concerning that leading al-Qaeda ideologues are openly arguing in interviews with international media that they are hopeful that they will be able to expand into the littoral countries of the Gulf of Guinea. Given the current trajectory, this is no longer an unlikely scenario. Currently, it is unclear how much longer countries such as Burkina Faso or Mali will be able to sustain increasing levels of terrorist violence.

This burgeoning religiously motivated terrorist threat in the Sahel is not gaining the attention it deserves in the international media or among key decision makers. Unfortunately, outside the region, this growing terrorist threat remains largely unnoticed, despite it being the most precarious security situation the region has experienced in decades. (Van Ostaeyen, 2024)

Summary – The way ahead

All religiously motivated terrorist factions throughout the Sahel continue their slow but steady state-building project. It is only a matter of time before one or more of the dominos may fall, likely leading to the complete or partial collapse of countries such as Mali and Burkina Faso. Obviously, this might also lead to an increase in the number of internally displaced persons as well as the number of refugees fleeing towards Europe via the Spanish Canary Islands.

In order to gain additional analytic insights, ChatGPT was tasked with computing a rough estimate of potential future trends in the region. These were the results:

“Using a linear regression model, the projected monthly attacks for the next 12 months range from approximately 139 in July 2024 to 203 in June 2025. Summing these monthly predictions gives an estimated total of about 2,049 attacks over the next year if the current trend continues.”

It is important to highlight that this grim prediction is based only on data gleaned from reports published by the terrorist groups themselves about their attacks. As has been pointed out above, all three terrorist groups in the region—JNIM, ISWAP and ISGS—continuously under-report their attacks. The actual number of terrorist incidents in the region is likely to be significantly higher.

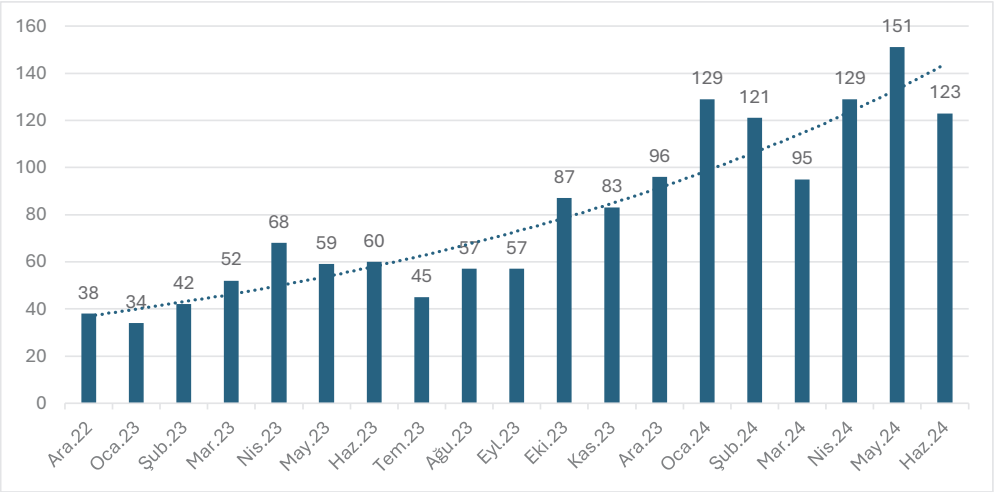


Table 1: Claimed Attacks (December 2022 – June 2024)

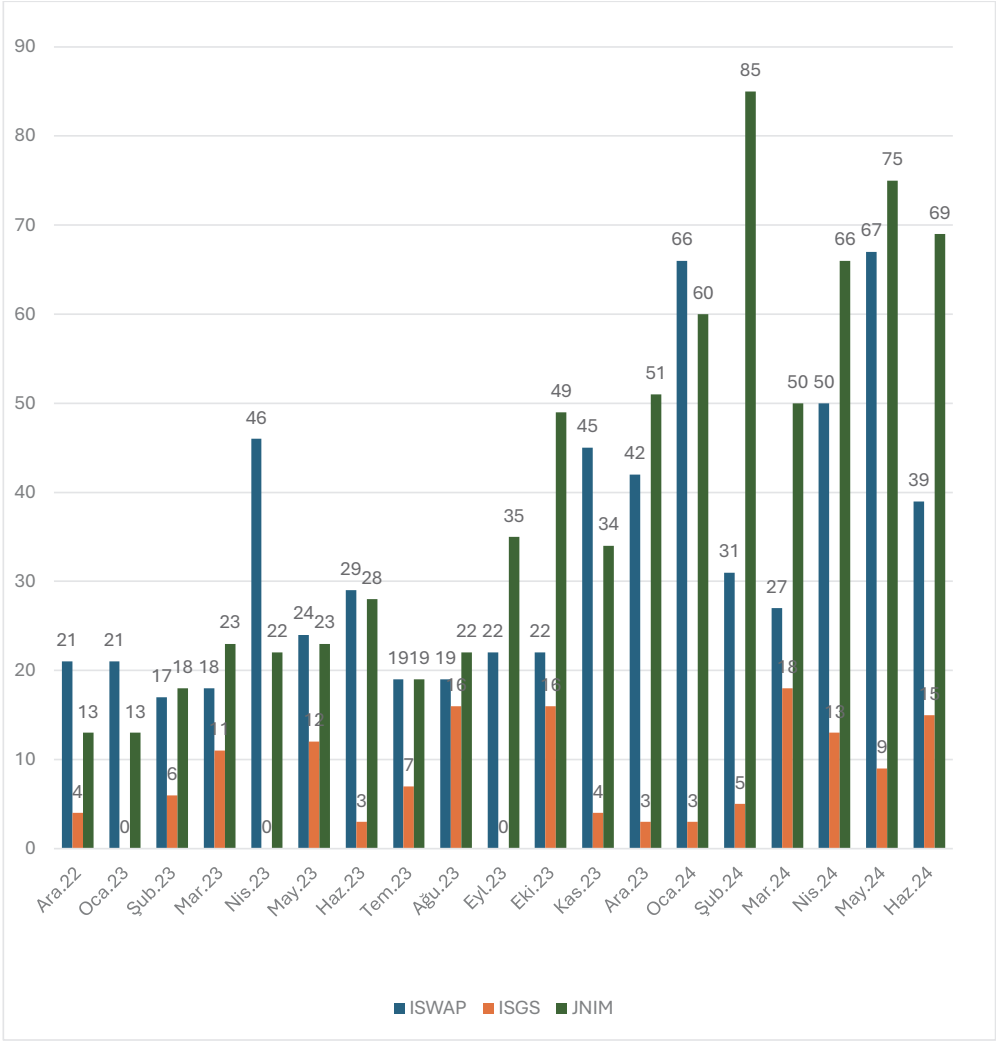


Table 2: Claimed Attacks per Group (December 2022 – June 2024)

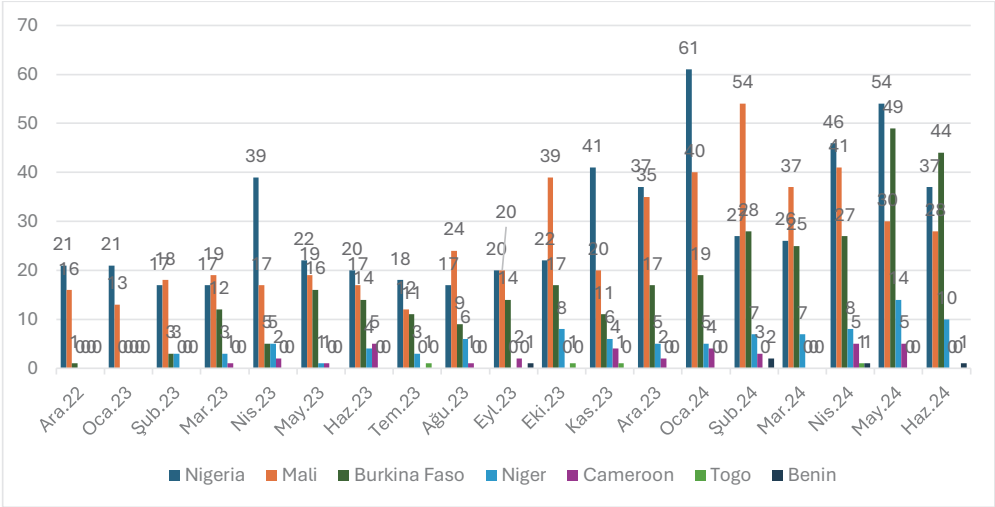
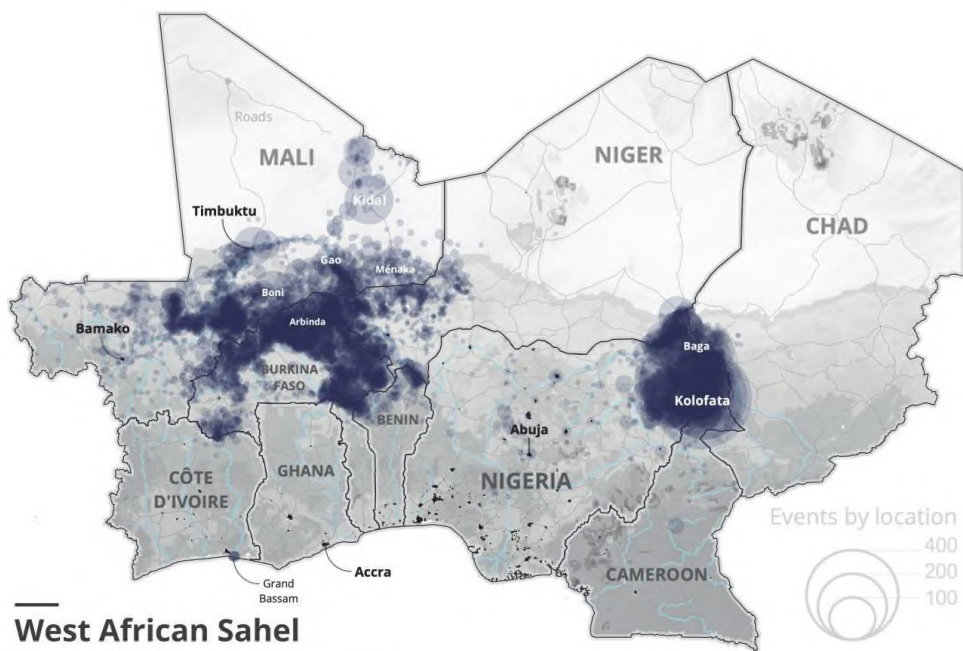


Table 3: Claimed Attacks per Country (December 2022 – June 2024)

Source: (Van Ostaeyen, 2024)



West African Sahel

(Jan 2014 - Nov 2024)

Data ACLED & Mapbox Visual J. Luengo-Cabrera



Source: (Luengo-Cabrera, 2024)

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PART III: REGIONAL SECURITY CHALLENGES

CHAPTER 17

The Sahel: Migration, Displacement and Refugee Crisis

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Abstract

The Sahel region confronts an unprecedented migration and refugee crisis driven by a complex web of security challenges, environmental degradation, and economic pressures. This chapter examines the multifaceted nature of forced displacement in the Sahel, analyzing both its root causes and humanitarian implications. Drawing on current data and field reports, the study reveals that violent conflicts, particularly from groups like Boko Haram and DAESH affiliates, climate change, manifesting through severe droughts and desertification, and endemic poverty and limited economic opportunities have induced displacement, devastated traditional livelihoods and driven youth toward perilous migration routes amidst dire humanitarian catastrophe. The research finds that humanitarian responses remain critically underfunded, with refugee camps facing severe resource constraints and host communities experiencing significant strain on infrastructure and services. Regional cooperation mechanisms struggle to address the scale and complexity of these crises. The chapter recommends a comprehensive approach combining enhanced security cooperation, environmental sustainability, and economic development initiatives. It concludes that sustainable solutions require unprecedented international collaboration and resource mobilization, emphasizing the fact that the Sahel's stability is inextricably linked to global security and development objectives.

Keywords: Migration, displacement, refugee, security, development, Sahel.

Introduction

The Sahel, a vast and semi-arid region, stretching across Africa from the Atlantic Ocean in the west to the Red Sea in the east, is a critical transition zone between the Sahara Desert to the north and the savannahs to the south (UNEP, 2020). Geographically covering parts of Senegal, Gambia, Mauritania, Guinea, Mali, Burkina

Faso, Niger, Chad, Cameroon and Nigeria, the region has historically served as a crucial ecological and cultural transition zone. Historically, the Sahel has been a hub of trans-Saharan trade routes, linking sub-Saharan Africa to North Africa and the Mediterranean (Badewa, 2022). The region is home to a population exceeding 150 million people, characterized by rapid demographic growth rates averaging 3.9 percent annually, and representing one of the world's fastest-growing population zones (World Bank, 2023). The population's reliance predominantly on agriculture and pastoralism for their livelihoods is continuously threatened by environmental degradation and resource scarcity (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2023). With a history of marginalization and chronic underdevelopment, the Sahel's socio-economic vulnerabilities have been exacerbated by political instability, weak governance, and the proliferation of armed conflicts, (Badewa, 2022). Its fragility amidst complex insecurity is perpetuated by its strategic resources – gold, petroleum, uranium, and water – and the struggle for power among diverse local and external actors.

Synonymous with complex humanitarian challenges, particularly concerning migration and forced displacement, the migration and refugee crisis in the Sahel is a complex and multifaceted one with profound regional and global implications. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees indicates that over 4.4 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) and approximately 1.6 million refugees exist across the Sahel due to various factors including violent conflicts, environmental shocks, and economic hardships (UNHCR, 2024). Armed groups such as Boko Haram, al-Qaeda affiliates, and DAESH factions, as well as militias and bandits have destabilized Sahel communities, forcing millions to flee their homes in search of safety. Additionally, the devastating effects of climate change, including prolonged droughts and desertification, have further eroded livelihoods, driving internal and cross-border migration in the Sahel. The scale and scope of displacement have created significant humanitarian and security challenges (Badewa and Dinbabo, 2021). Within the Sahel, overburdened host communities face increased pressure on scarce resources and basic infrastructure, leading to heightened intercommunal tensions and governance challenges (IOM, 2022).

Internationally, the Sahel serves as a critical transit route for irregular migrants from sub-Saharan Africa seeking passage to Europe via North Africa. This migration flow has raised global concerns about human trafficking, border security, and the humanitarian risks associated with perilous migration routes (Janos, 2017). The regional implications of this crisis extend far beyond national borders, creating significant pressure on neighboring states and transit countries. According to the African Development Bank (2023), host communities, particularly in Niger, Chad, and Mauritania, face severe strains on their already limited resources and basic services. The crisis has evolved into a complex emergency with international ramifications, as

evidenced by the increasing number of Sahelian migrants attempting dangerous Mediterranean crossings. Frontex M(2023) reports that approximately 28 percent of migrants detected on the Central Mediterranean route in 2023 originated from Sahelian countries, representing a significant increase from previous years.

Given its deteriorating trend, the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC, 2023) projects an increase in displacement figures beyond 2025 as conflict patterns and environmental degradation persist. This crisis has prompted increased international attention, with the European Union committing €455 million in humanitarian assistance to the Sahel in 2023 (European Commission, 2023). The magnitude of displacement has created what experts term a 'displacement economy', fundamentally altering traditional socio-economic structures and requiring new approaches to humanitarian response and development initiatives (World Food Programme, 2023). This crisis underscores the need for comprehensive strategies to address the root causes of displacement while building resilience within affected communities. A deeper understanding of the socio-economic, environmental, and security dynamics in the Sahel is crucial for formulating effective responses to the ongoing migration and refugee challenges.

This chapter examines the interconnected drivers of forced displacement in the Sahel, particularly focusing on the nexus between security challenges, environmental degradation, and socio-economic factors. It analyzes current migration patterns and dynamics, including internal displacement, cross-border movements, and the role of trafficking networks in facilitating irregular migration. Moreover, by assessing the humanitarian implications of the crisis, the immediate impacts on displaced populations, and the broader effects on host communities, the chapter evaluates policy responses and intervention strategies applied at all levels to address these challenges and identifies gaps and opportunities for improvement.

Drivers of Migration and Refugee Crisis in the Sahel

Migration and refugee crises in the Sahel are driven by a complex web of security, environmental, and economic factors. These forces have created conditions of instability and hardship that push populations and communities to seek safety and better opportunities elsewhere. The Sahel's intractable security-development challenges are largely induced by governance challenges, infrastructural decay, population explosion and ungoverned spaces, amidst the struggle for the soul and the resources of the region by local and external forces. Analyzing these drivers reveals the multifaceted nature of the crisis and the need for targeted interventions.

Security Challenges

The significant deterioration of the Sahel's security landscape over the past five decades, is a major driver of migration and refugee crises, given the proliferation of

violent extremist organizations and inter-communal conflicts across the region. Armed groups including Boko Haram, DAESH in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), and Al-Qaeda in the I Maghreb (AQIM) have established operational networks across the region, exploiting governance vacuums and porous borders (International Crisis Group, 2023). According to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN-OCHA) violent incidents linked to extremist groups in Mali alone increased by 300 percent between 2019 and 2023, resulting in the displacement of over 450,000 civilians (UN-OCHA, 2024). The tactics employed by these groups particularly target civilian populations, including forced recruitment, village raids and the destruction of essential infrastructure. UNHCR (2024) reports that extremist violence has forced more than 2.7 million people to flee their homes across the Sahel. Boko Haram's activities in the Lake Chad Basin have been especially devastating, causing the displacement of approximately 3.2 million people across Nigeria, Niger, Chad, and Cameroon (IOM, 2023).

General insecurity thrives within the atmosphere of political instability and armed rebellion across Sahel countries, particularly in Chad, Sudan, Mali, and Niger, with transborder implications given the region's pervasive border porosity. For instance, the long-running Chad-Sudan border rebellion and the current violence in Sudan (an ongoing civil war since the ouster of Omar El-Bashir in April 2019) have produced 200,000 plus deaths and two million displaced people (Badewa, 2022). The threats of armed insurrections, coups, weak governments and democratic U-turns undermined Niger's first 50 years of independence, as Mali's 20 years of nascent democratic gains were eroded by first, a 2012 military coup and another 24 May 2024 coup d'état eventually sacking Mali's democracy. These leave terrorists and armed insurgents (including the *Azawad*, the Tuareg, Imrad Defence Group, Ansar Dine, etc., mostly of which originate in northern Mali) controlling different parts of the countries and fighting to capture the capital (Essoungou, 2013; IRIN, 2018). By the end of March 2022, there had been five successful coups across the region – Burkina Faso, Chad, Guinea, Mali, Sudan – and coup attempts in Guinea Bissau. The latest casualty was Niger's democratically elected President Mohamed Bazoum's ouster in July 2023, after the presidential guard arrested and detained him, suspended the constitution, and installed General Abdourahmane Tchiani, the guard commander, as head of state. These trends create uncertainties, especially amidst the presence of Private Military Contractors (PMCs) such as Russia's Wagner Group, and other foreign mercenaries. (Janos et al., 2024).

The pervasive cases of 'failed or weak states' as a result of security threats across the Sahel underscores the linkage between (in)security and development and its effect on migration outcomes. The destructions of public amenities (water, electrical and telecommunication facilities, schools, markets, police posts, roads and bridges)

and farmlands hamper and disrupt livelihoods, businesses, transborder trade, food production, access, and supply in the region, forcing its population out of affected communities, creating uncontrolled incidences of internal displacements and cross-border migration, including refugees, asylum seekers, and irregular migrants (Badewa, 2022). The displacement of 1.4 million children by violent conflicts in the region heightens human insecurity, and 'migration' offers a major escape route for despondent youths (EU 2018). While 60 percent of the victims of trafficking are children, "an estimated \$3.8 billion annual profit amounts from arms, drug, and human trafficking in the Sahel region (UN-OCHA, 2017).

Environmental and Climatic Factors

Climate change has emerged as a critical driver of displacement in the Sahel, with the region warming 1.5 times faster than the global average (World Meteorological Organization, 2023). Prolonged droughts and advancing desertification have severely impacted traditional livelihoods. The United Nations Environment Program (UNEP, 2024) estimates that the Sahel loses approximately 1.2 million hectares of productive land annually to desertification, directly affecting 50 million people dependent on agriculture and pastoralism. The degradation of natural resources has intensified competition over remaining arable land and water sources. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO, 2023), crop yields in the region have declined by up to 40% in the past two decades, forcing traditional farming communities to abandon their lands. Pastoral communities face similar challenges, with traditional migration routes disrupted and grazing lands diminishing, leading to increased conflicts between herders and farmers.

Environmental change as a driver of forced migration in the Sahel, and by extension in Africa, is connected to other intersecting socio-political, demographic, and economic factors. (Adepoju 2008; Münz 2018; Parrish et al. 2020). The populations' vulnerabilities to shock, food insecurity, environmental-imposed migration and scarcities induce conflicts among resource dependents, occurring over ranges of spatial scales. These include movements between rural and urban areas to international migration, and ranges of temporal scales – from short-term migration, and circular migration, to permanent mobilities across Africa (Parrish et al. 2020).

Threats from recurring droughts, and desertification in the Sahel, especially since the 1970s/80s, induce famine, land degradation, scarcity of natural resources, and poor harvest (Essoungou, 2013, Badewa, 2022). The resultant food crisis and the scarcity of water resources, arable soil, and grazing lands heighten conflicts and competition for these resources among Sahel populations, particularly the subsistent rural dwellers and farmers (Gusikit and Lar, 2014; Badewa, 2022), who survive on subsistence agriculture, such as the farming of sorghum, millet, cotton, and other dryland crops, nomadic cattle rearing, and fishing in receding water sources.

According to the UN-OCHA (2024) one in six Sahelians experiences food insecurity, meaning 6.9 million people live with complicated livelihood amid structural challenges, resulting from sporadic amenities - dilapidated electricity, pipe-borne water, waste collection, and widespread open sewers (Badewa, 2022).

This above layer of development challenge causes displacement among its population, including irregular migration, and nomadic herdsman mobilities, whose disregard for international borders poses security risks to an increasingly volatile Sahel. The unpleasant effects of unrestricted transborder herders' movement from Chad, Niger and Mali induces violent conflicts, largely with sedentary farmers and their communities farther south, forcing many local populations to flee their homes, farmlands, and communities (LCBC, 2018).

Economic Pressures and Irregular migration

As one of the world's poorest regions, the Sahel countries' annual per capita gross domestic product (GDP) ranges from \$200 to \$700. Its exploding population, currently approximately 150 million, is projected to be 300 million by 2045 (UN-OCHA, 2024). As a result, chronic poverty and limited economic opportunities for its teeming – and largely youthful – population exacerbate the Sahel's displacement crisis. The World Bank (2023) estimated that over 60 percent of the region's population lives below the poverty line, with youth unemployment rates exceeding 40 percent in many areas. Such levels of economic hardship are a critical factor driving migration, given the Sahel's low human development indicators (widespread poverty and limited access to education and healthcare) (UNDP, 2023). Hence, job scarcities, particularly for young people, make them see migration as the viable path to a better future.

Economic pressure and rapid population growth in the Sahel creates a 'youth bulge' seeking opportunities elsewhere. The attraction of potential economic opportunities in Europe, rising insecurity and environmental distress in the Sahel have increased irregular migration trends across the region and North Africa. The International Labour Organization (ILO, 2024) estimates that approximately 70 percent of migrants leaving the Sahel are young people aged 15-35 years. These economic migrants often undertake perilous journeys across the Sahara Desert and the Mediterranean Sea, with thousands losing their lives annually. Unfortunately, these journeys are fraught with dangers, including exploitation by human traffickers and the risk of death in transit. Economic pressures also exacerbate vulnerabilities within displaced populations, as limited access to income-generating activities in refugee camps further deepens poverty. The region is bedeviled by the exclusion, social injustice and the marginalization of the population by political elites, leaving despondent youths vulnerable to criminal groups profiting from clandestine trafficking in humans, weapons and drugs across the Sahel's ungoverned spaces (Badewa and Dinbabo, 2021).

Available studies illustrate that inequality remains central to the neo-liberal economic reality. Since the 1980s, this has had a concomitant effect on migration, forcing youths from the Global South to the North (Lebovich 2018). Thus, some 4,000 African migrants transited the Sahel via Agadez, Niger in 2016. Half of the 2,800 migrant deaths recorded on the Central Mediterranean route were West Africans (Comolli 2019; IOM 2022), including sub-Saharan Africans risking the dangerous desert crossing through Niger and the 'Central Mediterranean Route' to Europe (Badewa and Dinbabo, 2021). Ethnographic research by Badewa and Dinbabo (2021) illustrated that due to security, environmental and economic crises, irregular migration is the norm as smuggling of illicit commodities and trafficking in humans pervades the Sahel, especially the vast desert areas of Chad, Niger, Mali and Libya. Mixed migration among migrant youths (mostly men) with relatively low education, financial and physical strength for enduring risks, as well as refugees, are using the same transportation oscillating in search of livelihoods along the Sahel routes. Traveling across the Sahel in thousands mostly from East, Central and West Africa (but including some migrants from elsewhere) through the North Africa corridor en route the Mediterranean Sea toward Europe, the mixed migration flow exposes "young male migrants, refugees and highly vulnerable women, unaccompanied girls, and children to the risk of trafficking, abuse, and exploitation" (Badewa and Dinbabo, 2021:11).

Trafficked youths are ripped off, sacrificing their life savings to embark on the trip, often motivated by prospects of job availability in destination countries based on the experiences of previously trafficked migrants who made it to Europe. Depending on the country of origin, road travel may take three weeks to reach Libya amidst anguish, rights abuses, victimization, exploitation and uncertainty. In some cases, migrants' dreams of reaching their final destinations are shattered by vulnerability to kidnappers or capture by organ harvesting gangs in the desert; even those who made it to Libya can also be auctioned as slaves, domestic servants, or plantation laborers, for as cheap as \$2300, where they are forced to work under inhuman conditions. Abuses include beating, mutilation, stabbing with sharp objects, rape, or the forced copulation by men of the same sex. Some are shot for refusing their 'master's' instructions, sent to detention camps or otherwise punished.

The migrants' servitude and abuses in Libya are followed by trafficking agents' exploitation, who request enormous fares to get them to Europe. Hence, the exploitation of migrants' labor in Libya happens for several months to cover the fare for the perilous boat trip across the Mediterranean Sea to Europe. In addition, "several repatriated migrants are stranded in Libya for years, doing menial jobs or farm labor, including women forced into prostitution, in most cases, by trafficking agents". Some are held hostage, raped or sexually abused by their traffickers, with the risk of Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs) high among young girls (Badewa and Dinbabo,

2021:15). The payment of smugglers for the onward journey to Europe opens a new degree of migrant vulnerability, who are stacked in rickety and unseaworthy boats or dinghies, which they knew could not reach Europe before being intercepted by European coastal guards. This practice provides sustenance to the local population in Libya's coastal cities, generating up to 275 to 325 million euros (\$292 million to \$346 million) per annum (Associated Press estimate) (Badewa and Dinbabo, 2021). It creates a huge humanitarian catastrophe, requiring urgent interventions from regional, external, and multilateral actors, and an alteration of the region's political economy.

Humanitarian Challenges and Responses

The grim reality of the confluence of violent conflict, environmental degradation, and economic hardship in the Sahel has produced one of the world's most acute migration and refugee crises. This has presented significant humanitarian challenges, compounded by the limited capacity of host countries to accommodate refugees, IDPs, regional instability and gaps in international response efforts. A thorough analysis of these challenges and their responses highlights the complexity of addressing this multifaceted issue.

Humanitarian Challenges

In broad terms, the humanitarian challenges present three scenarios. First, the condition of refugee camps is characterized by overcrowding, insufficient resources and healthcare, thus exacerbating the vulnerability of displaced populations to exploitation and abuse. Secondly, regional and international security dimensions imply the effect of the crisis on the rise of banditry, arms smuggling and human trafficking involving non-state actors in illicit activities, a challenge for both transit and destination countries. The third is the strain on host countries' limited resources and infrastructure pressures, further heightening social and political tensions with host communities.

1. Conditions in refugee camps

The humanitarian situation in Sahelian refugee camps presents a stark picture of human suffering and systemic challenges facing displaced populations, a critical level characterized by severe overcrowding and resource scarcity. Overstretching of resources results in inadequate access to food, clean water, and sanitation facilities, increasing the risk of disease outbreaks, as insufficient health services in the camps leave displaced populations vulnerable to chronic illnesses and acute health crises.

Living Conditions and Basic Services: Refugee camps across the Sahel region face severe overcrowding and inadequate infrastructure. According to UNHCR (2024), camps in Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso operate at 160-200 percent of their intended capacity. In Chad's Lake Province camps, an average of 15-20 people share living spaces designed for families of five, leading to significant health and safety concerns. Basic services are stretched beyond capacity, with many camps reporting critical

shortages: one latrine per 100 persons (standard is 1:20); access to only 7-10 liters of water per person daily (minimum standard is 20 liters); and one primary healthcare facility per 25,000 refugees (standard is 1:10,000). For instance, Niger's Diffa region camps designed for 10,000 currently host over 25,000 people, leading to deteriorating sanitary conditions and increased health risks (UNHCR, 2024). In most camps, access to education and livelihood opportunities are limited. UNICEF (2024) reports that only 40 percent of school-age refugee children attend school, with girls particularly disadvantaged. Vocational training and income-generating activities reach less than 25 percent of the adult camp population, leading to dependency on humanitarian assistance.

Health, Sanitation, and Food Security Challenges: The overcrowded conditions in camps have created severe health risks. Médecins Sans Frontières (2023) reports that respiratory infections, malaria and waterborne diseases are prevalent in most camps. The COVID-19 pandemic further exposes the inadequacy of healthcare infrastructure, with limited testing capacity and inadequate isolation facilities, and many camps reporting less than one medical facility per 10,000 residents. Maternal health services are particularly strained, with less than 30 percent of camps having adequate facilities for safe deliveries (WHO, 2024). In addition, food and nutrition insecurity remains a critical concern in the camps. The World Food Programme (2024) indicates that 60 percent of camp residents in the Sahel receive reduced rations due to funding shortfalls. Malnutrition rates are alarming as global acute malnutrition rates exceed 15 percent in many camps and micronutrient deficiencies are widespread, particularly affecting pregnant women and children. Hence, severe acute malnutrition affects 5-8 percent of children under five in Sahel camps.

Protection and Security Concerns: Displaced populations face significant security and protection risks. The IOM (2024) documents numerous protection challenges including a 40 percent increase in gender-based violence incidents (particularly against women and children) since 2022, severely underfunded child protection services, and a 65 percent rise in security incidents within and around camps, amid frequent reports of exploitation and forced labor. Hence, approximately 60 percent of Sahel IDPs encounter some form of exploitation or abuse, trafficking, forced labor, and sexual violence (IOM, 2024). The psychosocial impact of mental health toll on displaced populations is significant. The International Rescue Committee (2023) finds that "70 percent of adults show signs of psychological distress, amid prevalent depression and anxiety among youth, given the availability of limited mental health services, with one counsellor per 5,000 residents".

Current responses and gaps indicate that humanitarian organizations struggle to meet the growing needs of IDPs. The UN-OCHA (2024) reports that "only 45 percent of required funding was received in 2023, as critical sectors including protection,

health, and education remain severely underfunded, while staff shortages affect service delivery across all sectors. Due to increased vulnerabilities, there is an urgent need for improved security and support services across the refugee camps in the region.

2. Regional and international security dimensions

The Sahel's migration crisis and its complex security landscape is also marked by increased criminal activity. Criminal networks exploit displacement routes, with the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC, 2023) documenting a 200 percent increase in arms trafficking along major migration corridors since 2020. Human trafficking networks have become increasingly sophisticated, generating an estimated \$1.5 billion annually from exploiting vulnerable migrants. Non-state actors, including terrorist groups and organized crime syndicates, have established control over key transit routes. The African Union Peace and Security Council (2024) reports that these groups often provide 'protection services' to smugglers, creating a dangerous nexus between terrorism and human trafficking.

Transit countries like Libya and Algeria face unprecedented challenges in controlling their borders, with limited resources stretched across vast territories. The border protection measures in these countries force migrants and traffickers to change routes to Tunisia and Morocco. An April 2024 UNHCR report, estimated 3,045 dead or missing migrants along migration routes across the Mediterranean Sea since its last report in July 2022 (UNHCR, 2024). Recently, Al-Jazeera News (2025) reported a New Year 2025 incident involving "27 deaths, including women and children, and 83 rescued migrants from two capsized boats in Sfax waters in Tunisia – a relatively new departure point used by irregular migrants and refugees seeking to travel to Europe". As EU immigration policy stiffened, irregular border crossings to Europe declined and many irregular migrants changed destinations from Europe to the Americas and elsewhere.

3. Strains on host countries

The Sahel region is experiencing a profound transformation that necessitates a fundamental shift in humanitarian response strategies. The scale of displacement has reached unprecedented levels, with nearly 5 million people forced from their homes across various countries including Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger and several coastal nations as of mid-2024 (UNHCR, 2025). This represents a 25 percent increase since 2020, with particularly significant movements including 130,000 Malians seeking refuge in Mauritania in early 2024, and over 150,000 people fleeing from Burkina Faso to coastal countries since 2021. The situation in Burkina Faso appears particularly concerning, with projections suggesting the IDPs could reach 3.65 million by late 2025 (UNHCR, 2025).

The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (2023) reports increasing instances of conflict between host communities and displaced populations, particularly in areas with pre-existing ethnic or religious tensions. Thus, the strain on governance and public services often diverts attention from other critical development needs, hampering progress in host countries. Political instability, armed conflict, food insecurity and climate change continue to drive displacement, while neighboring countries, despite their challenges, maintain open borders and provide some access to basic services for asylum seekers. The humanitarian landscape is further complicated by escalating protection risks and limited access to essential services. According to UNHCR and the Danish Refugee Council (DRC) co-led Project 21's monitoring across 2,500 communities, conflict remains the primary driver of protection incidents, with gender-based violence accounting for 15 percent of cases. Access to affected populations has become increasingly challenging, with movement restrictions affecting nearly half of the most vulnerable communities (UNHCR, 2025).

Host communities bear a disproportionate burden of the crisis. Chad, which hosts over 500,000 refugees, spends approximately 8 percent of its national budget on refugee-related services, straining already limited public resources (World Bank, 2024). Host communities' essential amenities, such as water, healthcare and education systems are overwhelmed, leading to increased competition for scarce resources. Social tensions have emerged in many host communities, particularly in urban areas where refugees compete for jobs and housing. Despite these challenges, the region has demonstrated remarkable resilience, with host communities maintaining positive relationships with displaced populations (UNHCR, 2025).

Responses and Strategies

Three categories of responses and strategies are critical to addressing the Sahel migration and humanitarian crises. Significant humanitarian assistance through aid and resource mobilization from multilateral (e.g., the UN or other international agencies) and regional organizations e.g., the African Union (AU), the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), etc. are highlighted. The second is the factor of donor nations and international partners in addressing (or exacerbating) the crises, particularly in relation to migrant interdiction. The third category is the strategic responses from the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) to addressing migration, displacement, and refugee crises in the Sahel. These elicit debates on efforts toward cross-border coordination to address the root causes of migration in the Sahel.

1. Multilateral and regional body interventions

International organizations and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) play a critical role in providing aid to displaced populations in the Sahel. Agencies, such as

the UNHCR and the World Food Programme (WFP) deliver food, shelter, and healthcare services to selected camps in affected communities. However, gaps in aid remain significant, with funding shortfalls limiting the scope and effectiveness of humanitarian interventions (UNDP, 2023). The UN's Humanitarian Response Plan for the Sahel received only 45 percent of the requested funding in 2023, leading to critical shortfalls in essential services (OCHA, 2024). NGOs have implemented innovative approaches, including cash-transfer programs and mobile health clinics, but face challenges in reaching remote populations. Similarly, efforts to mobilize resources often face challenges such as donor fatigue and competing global crises, shifting priorities away from the region's calamities. Strengthening local capacity and fostering partnerships with community-based organizations could enhance the reach and sustainability of aid programs.

Regional bodies like the African Union (AU) and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) are instrumental in addressing the structural drivers of migration. The African Union's Continental Free Movement Protocol aims to create legal pathways for migration, though implementation remains challenging. ECOWAS has established a Migration Crisis Response Framework, facilitating information sharing and joint border management initiatives. Cross-border initiatives addressing root causes have shown modest promises. Initiatives such as the Sahel Alliance focus on fostering economic development, improving governance, and strengthening regional security (Badewa and Dinbabo, 2021). The Great Green Wall initiative, supporting environmental restoration across the Sahel, also demonstrates a potential for regional cooperation in addressing the environmental drivers of displacement. However, security concerns and limited resources hamper the full implementation of these programs. Cross-border coordination is essential for managing migration flows and combatting transnational criminal networks. Regional efforts to share intelligence, harmonize migration policies, and invest in border infrastructure are vital to achieving long-term stability.

2. International partners' interventions

International partners have increased their engagement, notably the 'Alliance for the Sahel' – a 2017 French-German development initiative, and the European Union's Sahel Stabilization Programs (2023-2027) pledging €4.5 billion. However, policy coherence remains a challenge, with some donor policies focusing more on migration containment rather than addressing root causes. For instance, the French-German development initiative's €6 billion pledge for 500 large-scale investment projects on food security and rural agriculture, youth education and employment, climate and energy, governance, and provision of essential services in the Sahel is largely unfulfilled (Badewa, 2022: 334). Interestingly, Türkiye's engagement in the Sahel region demonstrates a multifaceted approach combining religious diplomacy

with humanitarian and security cooperation. It strategically utilizes religious connections to strengthen its regional influence, implementing initiatives such as mosque construction and educational scholarships for Sahelian youth. Turkish NGOs, particularly the Humanitarian Relief Foundation (IHH) deliver humanitarian assistance (healthcare, water infrastructure, and food aid) to leverage military and defense agreements with numerous Sahel countries (Eyrice-Tepeciklioğlu, and Tepeciklioğlu, 2024). Nevertheless, government and humanitarian officials and top military personnel profiting from the few projects bankrolled incentivized conflict escalation for their personal enrichment, upending the region's political economy.

Similarly, tensions arising from conflicts and the militarization of migrants routes by local and foreign-backed mercenaries in the Sahel such as Niger, Libya, and Algeria amplify migrants' vulnerability to smugglers and human trafficker exploitation, abuses through interdiction and detentions (Badewa and Dinbabo, 2021; Kandilige and Hamidou 2019). The objective of militarizing the Sahel and North Africa to secure the European borders against 'irregular migrants' penetrating Europe range from the European Union's (EU) disbursement of €338 million to training border forces in Niger, ruthless migration containment efforts in Libya, and funding joint task operations with AU and UN agencies since 2014 (Badewa and Dinbabo, 2021; Comolli 2019). The EU's military measures obstructing migrants' transit through the Niger-Libya land route and the Libya-Mediterranean coast, including funding of the Libyan coast guards and detention camps for irregular migrants in Libya have produced mixed outcomes.

Despite reductions in irregular migrants reaching Europe, the negative implications of external interventions on unemployment, an upsurge in banditry, the proliferation of dangerous routes, and reverse migration flows exacerbate the humanitarian crisis. The dreadful conditions of Libyan detention facilities – poor sanitation, over-congestion, malnutrition, and the danger of trafficking – influenced the UNHCR-initiated Emergency Transit Mechanism (ETM) evacuation to Niger, where vulnerable refugees are periodically repatriated from Libya by the UNHCR to the ETM in Niger, and migrants' subsequent relocation elsewhere, including to Canada and Europe (Comolli 2019; Badewa and Dinbabo, 2021). International partners' interventions and migration securitization initiatives fall short of addressing the root causes of Sahel's migration and refugee crises. The diverse interests they served remain conflicting and further escalate the Sahel's security and development crises.

3. NATO's interventions in the Sahel

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) has increasingly recognized the Sahel's migration and refugee crisis as a significant security challenge affecting both regional stability and European security interests. NATO's multifaceted approach undertakes military, humanitarian, and capacity-building interventions in the region. NATO's engagement with Africa since 2010 has centered primarily on cooperative

security and crisis management through various initiatives aimed at promoting regional stability. Its involvement in the Sahel, evolving significantly since 2013, is primarily driven by concerns over irregular migration flows, terrorism, and regional instability affecting European security (Colombo, and Fakir, 2024). It implements Defense and Security Capacity Building programs and offers military education opportunities primarily through the Mediterranean Dialogue platform, even though it minimally engaged key regional actors, like Libya, Niger and Mali.

In working with North African and Sahelian partners such as Algeria, Egypt, Mauritania, Morocco and Tunisia, NATO has prioritized counter-terrorism efforts, tackling transnational crime and enhancing regional military capabilities. For instance, Mauritania, a long-standing NATO partner has new programs developed between NATO's Special Operations Forces Command (SOFCOM) and Mauritanian Special Forces since 2021 (D'Amato and Baldaro, 2024). Meanwhile, NATO's direct operational involvement in the region has been limited to two major missions: 'Unified Protector' in Libya and Operation Sea Guardian in the Mediterranean Sea (Colombo, and Fakir, 2024). To better coordinate these various regional activities, NATO established the 'Framework for the South' in 2016, aiming to provide a more coherent structure for its political initiatives in the area. Its strategic framework, outlined in the NATO 2030 initiative, explicitly recognizes the interconnected nature of African security challenges and their impact on Euro-Atlantic security (NATO, 2023). The migration crisis, exacerbated by violent extremism and climate change, prompted NATO to develop comprehensive intervention strategies beyond traditional military operations.

Military and Security Operations: NATO's military contribution to the Sahel primarily supports regional security forces and international partners through its Strategic Direction South Hub (NSD-S Hub), established in 2017. It provides intelligence sharing, strategic planning, and coordination support to regional security operations (NATO Strategic Direction South, 2023). The alliance has also implemented significant capacity-building programs, training local security forces in counter-terrorism operations and border management. The alliance's air surveillance capabilities have been crucial in monitoring migration routes and combating human trafficking networks. Operation 'Sea Guardian, while primarily focused on the Mediterranean, has extended its influence to address security challenges emanating from the Sahel region. NATO's surveillance data has helped identify and disrupt trafficking networks operating between the Sahel and Southern Europe (Allied Maritime Command, 2024).

Capacity Building and Training Initiatives: NATO's Defense Capacity Building (DCB) package for Sahel countries represents a significant contribution to addressing the root causes of the region's challenges. The program trained over 5,000 local

security personnel between 2018 and 2023, focusing on border security, counter-terrorism and humanitarian response capabilities (NATO Defense College, 2024). Specific initiatives include training programs for Mauritanian and Nigerien border guards, technical support for regional intelligence fusion centers; development of rapid response capabilities for humanitarian emergencies; and enhancement of civil-military cooperation mechanisms.

Humanitarian Coordination and Regional Partnerships: While not primarily a humanitarian organization, NATO has played a vital role in facilitating humanitarian support to displaced populations. The Euro-Atlantic Disaster Response Coordination Centre (EADRCC) has coordinated the delivery of essential supplies to refugee camps and supported emergency evacuation operations (EADRCC, 2023). NATO's strategic airlift capabilities are instrumental in delivering humanitarian aid to remote areas affected by displacement. Similarly, it has strengthened its partnerships with regional organizations, particularly the African Union (AU) and G5 Sahel. The NATO-AU partnership framework, established in 2019, facilitates information sharing and operational coordination in addressing migration-related security challenges (NATO-AU Joint Declaration, 2023). These partnerships' aim of intensifying effective border control operations and humanitarian response capabilities has recorded mixed outcomes.

Conclusion

The migration and refugee crisis in the Sahel is a multifaceted calamity rooted in a combination of security, environmental, and economic decadence. Key findings from this chapter reveal that ongoing conflicts fueled by extremist groups, the devastating impacts of climate change, and widespread poverty are driving mass displacement and migration across the region. Refugee camps are plagued by overcrowding and resource scarcity, while host countries face increasing pressures on infrastructure, governance, and social cohesion. Furthermore, the crisis has profound regional and international implications, with illicit activities such as human trafficking and arms smuggling exacerbating instability and insecurity.

Addressing the Sahel's migration and refugee crisis demands a comprehensive and collaborative approach. Humanitarian aid must be strengthened to provide immediate relief to displaced populations, with an emphasis on bridging gaps in funding and ensuring equitable resource distribution. Regional cooperation, spearheaded by organizations such as the African Union and ECOWAS, is essential for tackling the root causes of migration, including weak governance, economic underdevelopment, and environmental degradation. Moreover, the global community must share the responsibility by providing sustained financial support, fostering partnerships, and implementing policies that prioritize resilience-building over reactive measures. Long-term solutions require a shift from reactive aid to proactive investment

in resilience-building measures, such as climate adaptation projects and education programs.

The vision for a stable and resilient Sahel hinges on fostering peace, development, and sustainability through:

- (i) Security and Governance (prioritizing restored state presence in conflict-affected areas; strengthened local governance structures; and effective counter-terrorism strategies that respect human rights).
- (ii) Environmental Sustainability (prioritizing scaled-up climate adaptation programs; sustainable natural resource management; and innovative solutions for water security).
- (iii) Economic Development (prioritizing diversified economic opportunities for Sahelians; enhanced regional trade integration; and investment in human capital development).

Implementing these requires increasing development aid, strengthening private sector intervention in job creation, and ensuring equitable burden-sharing among nations. These sustainable interventions must address the root causes of displacement, from conflict resolution to economic empowerment, creating conditions for stability and resilience.

Going forward, it is crucial to recognize that the Sahel's challenges and opportunities are inextricably linked to global peace, security and sustainable development. While the challenges are formidable, the cost of inaction - measured in human suffering, regional instability, and global security implications - makes comprehensive intervention not just a moral imperative but a strategic necessity. A future where communities thrive without fear of violence, where livelihoods are secure despite climatic challenges, and where migration is a choice rather than a necessity is attainable through coordinated and inclusive action. By investing in the region's potential and addressing the drivers of displacement, stakeholders can pave the way for the Sahel that embodies stability, prosperity and hope for generations to come through collective action and sustained commitment.

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PART III: REGIONAL SECURITY CHALLENGES

CHAPTER 18

Religious Dynamics: Christian-Muslim Relations and The Future of Coexistence in The Sahel Region

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Abstract

The Sahel region's states have been dealing with a number of common issues, such as the presence of authoritarian leadership, a weak state, powerful military forces, influence from non-state and foreign actors, and the existence of radical religious beliefs. The Sahel region is home to numerous ethnic and religious groups, whose coexistence is a prerequisite for stability because of its turbulent past. The main threats to religious coexistence in recent decades have come from global religiously motivated movements, such as DAESH – Sahel Province (ISSP) and other organizations. Those communities once living peacefully together became a target for those groups. Salafist organizations target not only Christian groups but also Islamic communities, notably Sufis. The purpose of this chapter is to examine the interreligious dynamics of the Sahel region, paying particular attention to the ways that religions coexist. The chapter presents the shared and unique characteristics of the Sahel states, highlighting the significant role that ethnicity and other variables play in fostering peaceful cohabitation. We will also discuss the internal and external driving forces that lead to the breakdown of societal peace. The Mali war of 2012 was a turning point for the region, with internal strife being exacerbated by external entities such as al-Qaeda and further complicated by a crisis of governance. For instance, tensions along the herder-farmer fault line have a greater impact on Chad than these religious conflicts. The author contends that religious dynamics are a more nuanced reality than the widely held belief that radical religious exploiters is engaged in a conflict with non-believers.

Keywords: *Coexistence, failed states, interfaith dialogue, radicalism, Sahel, Salafism*

Introduction

Recently, there has been a notable surge in attention paid to the Sahel region by the West, as the area has experienced destabilization due to a succession of coups. Consequently, there has been an increase in radical organizations, which adversely affects numerous local groups. The escalation of violence, a surge in refugees, and deteriorating economic circumstances have collectively precipitated the crisis currently afflicting the Sahel region. A series of investigations have been conducted into this topic, with a particular emphasis on elements of security studies that pertain to destabilization, radicalization, and their regional implications. Central to the operations of extremist factions are non-Muslim minorities, who emerge as significant victims in this context. The endeavours of the Western powers in the region have failed to yield the anticipated stability, as evidenced by the unfavorable perception of France, while foreign entities—primarily Russian paramilitary units—are gaining influence, thereby exacerbating the complexities of the situation (Besenyő et al., 2024).

This chapter primarily examines the intricate relationships between minority Christian communities and the majority Muslim society. We examine historical parallels and divergences while emphasizing models of coexistence, such as those of Senegal and Burkina Faso, which may serve as illustrative examples for the post-conflict era. The objective of this study is to showcase these exemplary instances of coexistence while simultaneously emphasizing potential advancements that can be fostered through interfaith dialogue.

Examples of peaceful encounters of religions in the Sahel region

Country	Christian community (% of total population)
Cameroon	70.3
Nigeria	49
Chad	44.1
Burkina Faso	23
Guinea	8
Mali	5
Gambia	4.2
Senegal	4.1
Niger	2
Mauritania	1

Table 1. Christian communities in Sahel states in 2020

Source: Office of Interreligious Freedom (2021).

The spread of Islam and Christianity occurred primarily through trade routes, largely in a peaceful manner. The table above displays distinct proportions of various religious groups across each country, indicating a lack of homogeneity. A significant number of Muslims identify as Sunni or are affiliated with a Sufi order, often intertwining their practices with local Animist traditions in various instances. Christians are categorized into Catholic, Protestant, and, to a lesser degree, various other denominations. The role of missionary activity in disseminating Christianity has been substantial, and the modernization initiatives of colonialists included the propagation of Christianity, especially through education. The Sahel region has a rich historical tapestry characterized by the harmonious coexistence of diverse religious traditions (Shobana, 2022).

Throughout various periods, external faiths like Christianity and Islam, as they emerged in the Sahel, intertwined with indigenous animist customs, culminating in a distinct form of religious expression. In numerous instances, the two prominent monotheistic faiths intertwined, with mixed marriages being formed, and there was a mutual observance and respect for each other's religious celebrations and practices. Within the African context, the state boundaries established by colonial powers were entirely foreign and failed to serve as the principal source of identity for individual communities, where tribal or kinship affiliations held greater significance. Nonetheless, it is evident that certain states have developed models of cooperation, shaped by historical contexts, which continue to serve as pertinent examples in contemporary discourse. Senegal, in conjunction with Burkina Faso, may be regarded as successes in this respect (Shobana, 2022).

The Sahel region boasts a rich heritage of Islamic intellectual traditions that have flourished for millennia. The Sahel region represents a complex tapestry of cultures, where Islam, Christianity, and indigenous African traditions have navigated a coexistence marked by both harmony and occasional discord. Nevertheless, as Soares (2021a) observes, Muslims have historically constituted a minority within the region. The colonial impact of the 19th century initiated a process of Islamisation that permeated the broader society, thereby introducing comparable religious traditions to the predominantly agrarian community. The establishment of borders and the formation of contemporary states predominantly involved the assimilation of European paradigms, notably the principle of secularism, with the singular exception of Mauritania, which embraced the framework of an Islamic republic (Thurston, 2021).

While colonialism exerted a degree of unifying influence on religious communities, particularly within rural societies, it is important to emphasise that both the Christian minority and the prevailing Muslim majority society should not be perceived as a uniform entity. Although the majority of Muslims in the identify as Sunni, there exists a rich historical tradition of Sufism. Additionally, we observe the rise of

Shi'a communities in Africa, primarily composed of individuals who have migrated from the Middle East or have embraced this particular religious orientation.

In the latter part of the 20th century, the attainment of independence coincided with the integration of religiously motivated political mobilisation into the fabric of daily existence in the Sahel. Specifically, as the influence of political Islam emerged from the Middle East, there was a movement to align the constitutions of previously secular states with Shari'a law. Nevertheless, in conjunction with the process of Islamisation, Pentecostalism—a dynamic Protestant movement that asserts the immediacy of divine experience—is gaining prominence, especially in urban environments. Pentecostalism, akin to specific variations of political Islam, operates on a 'us versus them' paradigm, which, by pursuing exclusivity, disrupts the imperfect harmony that exists, rendering conflict between the two religious ideologies unavoidable.

Simultaneously, during the 1970s, a religious tradition, albeit of limited significance, arose in the Yoruba-inhabited region of Nigeria, characterised by the organic coexistence of Islam and Christianity and referred to as 'Chrislam' (Janson, 2016; Mayer, 2024). 'Chrislam' operates on the foundational idea that Christianity and Islam are inextricably linked within the African milieu, and its emergence in the cosmopolitan setting of Lagos is certainly not a mere coincidence. This author does not intend to convey that the past decades have been characterised by consistent inter-religious tolerance and harmonious coexistence; however, it is essential to highlight the rich and varied tradition that defines the Sahel region as a whole.

According to Ossai (2024), in some parts of Nigeria, there are things that help religious groups get along, such as 'healing sites' that people from both communities can visit or marketplaces that make it easy for people to trade with each other, which leads to more cooperation between faiths. He emphasises the capacity of community members to avert conflict intensification.

In addition to Nigeria, Senegal serves as a noteworthy illustration of harmonious coexistence, manifesting not merely on an occasional basis but rather at the state level. The Senegalese case shows that the presence of Sufi orders, especially the Tijaniyya and Muridiyyah, and their support for peaceful coexistence are important for understanding what makes a success (Soares, 2021b). While Christianity emerged in the Sahel subsequent to the formation of the Sufi orders, both have played significant roles in fostering the predominantly tolerant society of Senegal. The absence of exclusivity and securitisation has concurrently reinforced the cohesive social fabric of the nation.

Burkina Faso, where approximately 23% of the populace identifies with a Christian heritage (predominantly Roman Catholic) provides a noteworthy illustration of harmonious coexistence. In Burkina Faso, various elements have contributed to the

establishment of a notably resilient framework for interreligious coexistence. These include the perception of religion as a personal matter rather than the predominant source of identity; the constructive impact of interfaith dialogue; the significance of interfaith marriages; the absence of rigid boundaries between religious groups; and the influence of African animist traditions alongside the nation-building process, which collectively position the country as a commendable example (International Crisis Group, ICG, 2016).

In many cases, academic literature and analysts ascribes the conflicts in the Sahel to variations in religious beliefs. Various religious communities are engaged in conflict due to doctrinal differences, as both monotheistic faiths pursue a sense of exclusivity. The predominant focus of experts tends to be on the examination of either Christianity or Islam, while the underlying factors that facilitate cooperation or the non-religious root causes of conflict receive comparatively less attention (Ifeme, 2016). The preceding frameworks of collaboration may provide a valuable reference in the context of post-civil war scenarios.

Scholars mainly focus on the mechanisms through which religiously motivated and other radical organizations exploit the circumstances present in fragile states. This approach holds significance, and this chapter will delve into its consequences; however, it is equally important to examine the underlying causes that contributed to this situation and to draw insights from successful instances of prior coexistence. When we examine *long-durée*, it becomes evident that the dynamics between Muslim and Christian communities have not been defined by perpetual conflict but instead by a significant degree of coexistence.

The rise of Salafism in the Sahel

From 2020 to 2024, an unforeseen series of coups unfolded across the Sahel region, leading predominantly to the establishment of military juntas. The adverse trajectory in Mali commenced in 2012, when insurgents, supported by religiously motivated factions, proclaimed autonomy for the northern region. In the aftermath of a military coup, French forces were deployed to combat the religiously motivated factions. The civil war, ongoing since 2012, has undergone multiple phases that remain unresolved. The tumultuous circumstances in Mali have adversely affected neighboring nations and have progressively contributed to a broader instability across the region (Thurston, 2024).

The Sahel region has experienced a significant escalation in violence and terrorist activities relative to previous years, rendering it one of the most conflict-laden areas globally. Contemporary analysts frequently reference Afghanistan as a cautionary tale, illustrating how radical organizations in the region can effortlessly seize territory and usurp governmental authority (Besenyő et al., 2023).

Ibrahim (2021) delineates the research on Muslim-Christian relations into two distinct strands: 1) A culturalist perspective suggests that a more intolerant orientation within Islam has become more prominent, leading to the emergence of both intra- and inter-religious conflicts within society. The former primarily engages with the practice of Sufism, whereas the latter predominantly attributes culpability to Christians; 2) the structuralist approach scrutinizes the economic and social milieu particular to the Sahel that gives rise to Salafi organizations. According to Ibrahim (2021), there are different levels of Salafism’s expansion, and the two approaches cannot be analyzed narrowly and independently of each other—an opinion shared by the author. When viewed through an alternative lens, the dynamics within Sahel can be characterized as both externalist and internalist. The former pertains to influences originating from beyond the region, particularly from the Middle East and the Maghreb, whereas the latter pertains to the internal developments that have contributed to the rise of failed states.

Table 2 draws on data from the Pew Social Hostility Index (SHI) (Pew Research Center, 2020), which systematically ranks nations based on specific scores, with one of the pivotal criteria being the measure of religious freedom. The latest ranking occurred in 2020, just prior to the onset of the crises. The findings indicate distinctly that Mali and Nigeria represent the two most challenging societies, while Burkina Faso and Cameroon follow closely in a secondary position. The situation in Burkina Faso illustrates a troubling decline in peaceful coexistence, yielding to the emergence of conflict but Senegal continues to uphold the historically established model of coexistence. It is prudent to draw a comparison between Table 2 and the proportion of the population that identifies as Christian, as presented in Table 1. The demographic balance of Muslims and Christians in Nigeria renders the situation particularly critical.

Country	Social Hostilities Index
Mali	Very high
Nigeria	Very high
Burkina Faso	High
Cameroon	High
Chad	Moderate
Guinea	Moderate
Mauritania	Moderate
Niger	Moderate
Senegal	Low

Table 2. Social Hostilities Index, 2020

Source: Pew Research Center (2020).

In the Sahel region, it is evident that the military takeover has not inherently bolstered stability; rather, it has exacerbated the armed conflict among various factions, including religiously motivated groups, rebels, gangs and external non-state actors such as the Wagner Group/Africa Corps, resulting in a significant escalation of violence. Within the framework of Muslim-Christian relations, the circumstances have been leveraged notably by religiously motivated groups advancing in the area. In Burkina Faso, once regarded as a commendable historical instance of coexistence, the delicate political transition that ensued after the departure of a leader who had maintained power for 27 years was seized upon by a range of armed factions. Scholars contend that the delicate balance among various religious communities in Burkina Faso was inherently tenuous, rendering it susceptible to exploitation. Haavik et al. (2022) contend that the erosion of the entrenched deep state and neo-patrimonial framework, which had developed over a period of more than two decades, has facilitated a rise of violent incidents.

In the Sahel region, two prominent global religiously motivated organisations are functioning, both of which are integral components of a broader international network: the al-Qaeda network (Jama'a Nusrat ul-I wa al-M or JNIM) and DAESH of Sahel Province (ISSP) (formerly known as DAESH in the Greater Sahara or ISGS). Furthermore, there are homegrown organisations that have emerged organically within particular nations, exemplified by Ansar Allah in Burkina Faso, alongside those that primarily enlist local individuals with a lesser emphasis on foreign combatants. Global religiously motivated organisations exhibit varying strategies; while al-Qaeda's local units offer a semblance of protection for the local populace, DAESH employs distinctly brutal tactics (Haidara, 2024).

In the Sahel, religiously motivated groups frequently execute assaults targeting the Christian community and its symbols, along with government institutions and conventional military forces. In Nigeria, the extremist group called Jama'at Ahl as-Sunnah lid-Da'wah wa'l-J (known commonly by its Western name as Boko Haram) frequently perpetrates assaults against Christians in the northern regions. religiously motivated groups violently attacked a church in Burkina Faso in 2019, tragically killing the pastor. Since then, attacks against Christian communities have also occurred regularly in Burkina Faso.

In numerous instances – Boko Haram being a notable example – a distinct ideology takes shape. Local Muslim communities often attribute their challenges, such as marginalization and poverty, to the actions and policies of the West. The French military intervention has further entrenched this anti-Western perspective, failing to address the broader security issues at hand. This context frequently depicts Christian minorities as representatives of Western interests, urging them to oppose the

government (Thurston, 2016). Conversions between religions or interfaith marriages is not rare in the Sahel, often becoming a focal point for intimidation.

It would be inaccurate to assert that the Christian communities are the foremost target of religiously motivated groups, given the considerable conflict among various Islamic denominations. Consequently, in the Sahel, particularly among the youth, a particular Islamic interpretation of Salafism has emerged, which stands in opposition to the Sufi traditions that have long been established, especially in the Sahel region. Salafism does not possess an intrinsic anti-Christian stance, as Islam acknowledges monotheistic faiths, such as Christianity, as part of the so-called 'religions of the Book'. The Prophet Muhammad granted Christians the liberty to practice their faith in exchange for a personal tax during his lifetime. But in the Sahel, much like in the Middle East, many religiously motivated organisations advocate animosity towards Christians (Soares, 2021b).

Salafism has intermittently emerged in the Sahel region throughout history; however, its present resurgence is predominantly attributable to global occurrences beyond the region's confines. Consequently, Saudi Arabia's significance merits attention, along with that of other Gulf oil monarchies that endorse conspiratorial factions to fulfil their geopolitical objectives. This should not be conflated with terrorism, as numerous Salafi Muslims denounce the use of violence ('quietist') while still adhering to conservative doctrines (Meservey, 2021).

In this process, the significance of transnational connections is noteworthy in conjunction with the annual pilgrimage to Mecca, as organizations have introduced a novel interpretation of Islam to the region (Østebø, 2022). An illustrative instance is the Tablighi Jamaat, which emerged from the Deobandi school in the Indian subcontinent and promotes a revival of the foundational sources of law found in the Qur'an and hadith. Salafi organizations exploit the vulnerabilities of marginalized youth, asserting that adhering to religious practices and Islamic tenets rooted in conservative ideologies will address societal issues. In the context of the prevailing issues, there is a tendency to vilify foreigners, the influence of the French, and local Christian communities (Soares, 2021a).

Reasons behind the rise of interreligious violence in the Sahel region

In the Sahel region, radicalism is notably concentrated in two specific geographical sub-regions: the Lake Chad basin, encompassing north-eastern Nigeria, south-eastern Niger, and south-western Chad; and the area defined by northern Mali, eastern Burkina Faso, and western Niger (Thurston, 2024).

In Niger, sporadic attacks on Christian communities have been recorded since 1998, but the first major urban riot took place in 2015 in the town of Zinder, where young people protested over the Charlie Hebdo terrorist attack in Paris. A French

satirical newspaper published cartoons of the prophet Mohammed in defence of *laïcité* (French secularism), a feature of the Nigerian political system. In 2015, two attacks in French Algeria left 12 people dead and many more injured. In the Western world, sympathy for the victims and the slogan 'Je suis Charlie' spread on social media and in street demonstrations, which was seen as blasphemy in the Islamic world, particularly by followers of the Salafi movement. The demonstrations in Zinder were organised via social media under the slogan 'Je ne suis pas Charlie', and very quickly turned violent. The young people were mobilised by local Salafist movements, and, among other things, 45 churches were burnt down, hundreds of Christians were forced to flee their homes and slogans against France and the United States were chanted. It is worth referring here to Table 1, which shows that less than 2% of Niger's population is Christian.

Schritt (2015) considers the degree to which the riots can be understood solely through the lens of the Islam-Christian divide, as well as the extent to which additional factors played a role. The significance of the local context is emphasised, with the author contending that adverse socio-economic conditions and exclusion contributed to the protests that had previously occurred, although they were not directed against Christians. The demonstrators vociferously articulated their dissent through anti-government slogans.

In this context, one might reference Burkina Faso, where anti-Christian atrocities transpired in the eastern regions of the nation. Individuals interviewed by one of the researchers expressed the sentiment that, in numerous instances, they perceived the government as preferential towards Christian communities while sidelining Muslims (ref.). This is somewhat associated with the French military presence in the region, the conclusions of which was viewed favourably by the communities. Historical narratives that focus on perceived grievances regarding the collaboration of local governments with European powers significantly influence the discourse within local Salafi communities, resulting in the marginalisation of local Muslim populations by governments. Local society frequently portrays Christians negatively.

Salafi groups are critical of the ascendance of European secularism, particularly the French concept of *laïcité* as is embedded within the constitutions of various states in the region, with the notable exception of Mauritania. But the eradication of exclusion may be achievable if the constitution were founded upon the principles reflective of the predominant Muslim society, particularly emphasising Shari'a law (Thurston, 2021).

In the case of Nigeria, where the social fault lines are most prominent (as shown in Table 2) we also witness the aforementioned debate around secularism and the associated violence from the 1960s on. In Nigeria, there were heated debates about the role of Islam in the constitution-making process that began after independence

and various coups. Nigeria's constitution, like those of other states in the region, is secular and calls for harmonious coexistence between religions to strengthen national unity. However, the question of secularism is interpreted differently by religious groups. Some religious leaders argue that the 1999 Constitution does not explicitly mention the term secularism, while Christian communities argue that the document provides protection against religious fundamentalism. However, Nigeria's leading politicians often refer to Nigeria's 1986 entry into the then-known Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC), which now goes by the name Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), showing that Islam is not only part of the private sphere but also shapes everyday political processes (Ogbu, 2014).

Jama'atu Nasril Islam, the overarching body representing Muslims in Nigeria, contends that the absence of a clear mention of secularism within the Nigerian constitution substantiates the assertion that the nation is not secular. Aohiokhai (2022) elucidates the evolution of the Christian-Muslim conflict in Nigeria over recent decades through five distinct factors:

1. The historical legacy of colonialism and the enduring frameworks of neocolonial governance.
2. Narratives of history that articulate the traumas experienced within a predominantly tribal society.
3. Islam and Christianity made their entrance into Nigeria prior to the onset of colonialism, during a period when the two faiths were engaged in a worldwide contest for influence.
4. There exists no singular identity in Nigeria; however, tribalism exerts a considerable influence.
5. Deficiencies within the educational framework are insufficient to eradicate societal divisions.

The political crises and state transformation in Nigeria are closely associated with the Islamic-Christian confrontation. In the 1966 coup in Nigeria, members of the predominantly Roman Catholic Igbo tribe played a major role, confronting Muslim groups, particularly in the north, mainly for political rather than religious reasons.

To this we can add that the media has also played a significant role in intensifying Christian-Muslim tensions in Nigeria on more than one occasion. In 2005, the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* published cartoons of Muhammad, advocating the value of European freedom of expression and the importance of protecting against self-censorship. The cartoons depicted the Prophet Muhammad with a bomb on his head, an offensive blasphemy for all Muslims. Protests had broken out across much of the Islamic world. In the north of Nigeria, for example, as story arrived from Europe,

mass demonstrations and attacks on the local Christian minority and churches took place (Salawu, 2009).

In northern Nigeria, one can also observe the characteristic conflict between farmers and herders that is prevalent in the Sahel region. The Fulani community is characterised by a seminomadic and nomadic way of life, primarily relying on livestock for sustenance. For centuries, they have coexisted harmoniously with Christian communities that are predominantly engaged in agriculture. In recent years, however, the equilibrium has been disrupted by factors such as population growth, climate change, and the emergence of new technologies (Olojo, 2022). Consequently, the Fulani have levelled accusations against Christians regarding the obstruction of their routes and the appropriation of their livestock. The Fulani are also notably present in significant numbers within radical factions, engaging in assaults against Christians (Cline, 2021). This case illustrates that the origins of the conflict extend beyond mere religious differences.

How to promote peaceful coexistence in the Sahel?

As indicated in the preceding sections of this study, the influence of religion cannot solely account for the Islamic-Christian conflict. Nonetheless, radical factions operating under the guise of religious motives possess a significant incentive to disrupt harmonious frameworks of coexistence and undermine social and political dynamics. Alongside religious radicalism, a multifaceted array of elements – including exclusion, economic disadvantage, the shortcomings of French military intervention, and the intricacies of internal political dynamics – contribute to this phenomenon. The Sahel region has recently garnered attention primarily due to its prevalence of military coups and acts of terrorism. The diminishing influence of Western powers raises concerns, particularly from a European viewpoint, as the potential for destabilization could precipitate a significant influx of migration at any moment.

In June 2024, Senegal, known for its remarkable peaceful coexistence, established an Inter-religious Council for Peace. The recently formed organization draws upon decades of informal inter-religious interactions and seeks to cultivate and preserve religious diversity. Various African states, including Tanzania and Sudan, host an organization similar to Senegal's. The African Union, as a significant regional entity, is endeavoring to highlight the importance of inter-religious dialogue and collaborative efforts (Niamien, 2024).

The significance of this matter lies in the fact that, within the Sahel, religious communities are instrumental in fostering coexistence and denouncing radicalism (Berlingozzi, 2024). Numerous instances illustrate the profound impact that the collaborative efforts and initiatives of individual Muslim and Christian religious leaders can have in fostering peace within a community and transforming narratives of

exclusivity. Religious leaders have the potential to collaborate in addressing the economic disparities that fundamentally contribute to the challenges faced in the Sahel. Nevertheless, it is of paramount importance to denounce the actions of extremist organizations.

Akinocho et al. (2024) arrive at a comparable conclusion, emphasizing four critical factors that are fundamental for harmonious coexistence:

1. The arrangement of community gatherings that facilitate interactions among individuals of diverse religious beliefs, fostering an atmosphere of mutual respect and understanding. This may be a crucial factor in allowing extremist organizations to take advantage of the void and attempt to incite conflict among religious communities.

2. The author contends that in instances of weak or failed states, non-state actors can uphold an autonomous legal framework or system of regulations in opposition to the central government, particularly when they assert dominance over a specific territory.

3. Mitigating economic and social disparities is essential for fostering a harmonious coexistence. It is reasonable to assert that, in numerous instances, violent conflicts arise not solely from religious divisions but rather from conditions of deprivation.

4. The significance of religious leaders and civil society merits emphasis. Currently, the void in the Sahel is occupied by radical organizations that, alongside their armed endeavors, have repeatedly offered public goods to the local populace.

Ossai (2024) substantiates this by using Yorubaland in Nigeria as an example, where a heightened sense of social cohesion is evident. He emphasizes two considerations: A civil authority tasked with fostering unity and establishing a robust, identity based on the principles of power sharing and inclusive governance that may ultimately accommodate all religious denominations. Currently, certain governmental entities view the proliferation of radicalism primarily as a military issue. Comparable to the rise of DAESH in Iraq and Syria, the international community primarily focusses on its military defeat. The significance of this cannot be overlooked; however, in the absence the execution of the aforementioned factors, military intervention in isolation will fail to resolve the issue.

Conclusions

The Sahel region faces significant challenges regarding Christian-Muslim relations, influenced by political and socio-economic factors that threaten coexistence.

In opposition to long-standing Sufi traditions, certain Salafi interpretations have become popular among young people. Because religiously motivated groups have

embraced Salafism and used it to incite hatred against Christians, this change has complicated the theological landscape in the Sahel, even if Salafism does not fundamentally reject Christianity. Christians and other rival Islamic sects, especially Sufis, are targets of terrorist and extremist organizations that take advantage of social and economic vulnerabilities of underprivileged populations. Countries like Burkina Faso, which had previously demonstrated wonderful coexistence, have had their stability and level of violence eroded as a consequence of this.

Rather than bringing stability to the region, political shifts and military coups have intensified tensions among various groups, including religiously motivated groups and other NSAs. The environment has become increasingly unstable because of these interactions, with religious communities frequently caught in the middle and subjected to intense demands to conform to the dominant ideologies. Meanwhile, outside forces have contributed significantly to escalating tensions within communities. The situation has deteriorated further because of the participation of foreign forces like Russian paramilitary groups and the French military. As a result of these operations' lack of resolution of underlying conflicts, the Christian minority are sometimes seen as proxies for Western interests, which in turn heightens tensions.

Now, more than ever, interfaith discussion must take centre stage in interventionist and development efforts to shift attention away from military-centric approaches and economic pressures. Efforts to create a more peaceful society can learn from the region's past instances of coexistence. Fostering discussion and understanding among multiple religious communities is crucial for the future of Christian-Muslim relations in the Sahel, as is tackling the root causes of political instability, external influences, and the emergence of radical ideologies.

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PART III: REGIONAL SECURITY CHALLENGES

CHAPTER 19

Management of Humanitarian Operations and Situation in Sahel By Applying Resilience-Based Methods in Relation to Human Trafficking

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Abstract

It is an undeniable fact that being a sufferer of terrorism and violent extremist groups, the Sahel region has been defined for years as the epicenter of the security crisis in the area, where millions of vulnerable people are in need of humanitarian assistance. The complex security, societal and cultural challenges currently occurring in the Sahel region impose a significant burden on humanitarian and other international organizations in terms of preventive, reconstructive, and rehabilitative efforts. Furthermore, the ongoing state of our environment contributes to unanticipated natural disasters, resulting in an increase in the number of young victims as trafficked persons by violent and terrorist groups in devastated areas, primarily in the area of the Sahel. Raising more difficulties concerning the complex conflicts of the region, war, resettlements and natural disasters causing widespread deterioration of the education, social services and government system too that are allowing human traffickers to easily exploit victims for mainly sexual exploitation.

Article 3 of the North Atlantic Treaty refers to resilience as a principal ability that is both a national responsibility and a collective commitment. Additionally, it is a widely used term in various disciplines, including in engineering, ecology and psychology, to explain the adaptive resistance of materials or structures to shocks at a systemic level. It can also be seen as an organizing force, when a system was destroyed by forces and reorganized at another level. As numerous theories and empirical research data support, the basic features of resilience – the emergence, preconditions, and functioning of reactive behavior – can be effectively used in crisis situations such as

the Sahel, where it is essential to apply a practice that based on adequate resilience principles for individuals and communities. In order to address the phenomenon and promote sustainable peace and development, enhanced coordination among states, a more decisive and thoughtful harmonization of interdisciplinary guidelines and practical interventions is needed based on resilience principles, beyond traditional reconstruction, public health, and emergency response activities.

The main goal of this chapter is proving its hypothesis that there is a strong and indisputable relationship between human trafficking and violent groups at the region of Sahel resulting conflict, resettlements and natural calamity. We focus on the main features of the principles and guidelines applied by the NATO concerning resilience and sexual and human trafficking. The chapter also addresses the social and cultural vulnerabilities as well as other deficiencies of the region, the primary aim of which is uncovering the factors and correlations that influence efficiency of resilience-based preparedness for continuity of government, essential services to the population, civil support to military operations and humanitarian operations in the Sahel.

The chapter concludes by examining the existing guidelines in NATO regarding the fight against human trafficking which should be applied more effectively strengthened by integrating elements that constitute resilience theories, in coordination with the guidelines and principles used by humanitarian aid organizations.

Keywords: *the Sahel, humanitarian crisis, climate change, resilience, human trafficking,*

Introduction

One of the most complex and globally impactful challenges of recent years is the humanitarian crisis in the Sahel region, which manifests in numerous forms and creates an extremely significant challenge for both local governance and international organizations. Among the challenges in the region are natural disasters, lack of access to clean drinking water and food, the absence of proper governance, alongside human trafficking sometimes facilitated by terrorist organizations. Human trafficking, as one of the most complex types of organized crime, can take on various forms; however, in the Sahel, the most prevalent kind is intended for sexual exploitation, primarily affecting women and minors. The situation is exacerbated by the fact that in areas affected by armed conflicts, the lack of basic infrastructure such as schools or other social institutions, as well as the absence of border control, allows human traffickers to operate unhindered. Accordingly, one of the fundamental pillars of humanitarian crisis management aimed at addressing these challenges is complex crisis management carried out by humanitarian aid organizations, which includes the development of resilience capabilities, as outlined in Article 3 of the North Atlantic

Treaty, both theoretically and practically in the region. This can contribute to reducing the intensity of human trafficking in both preventive and rehabilitative forms.

Method

The chapter is structured by using practical experiences of members of humanitarian organizations and the main principles of international INGOs and NGOs and NATO as secondary data sources, regarding the complex nature of the study, comparative document analysis was applied, critically acknowledging the credibility, relevance, and timeliness of the used data.

1. The role of resilience in the development of effective policies and practices in the fight against human trafficking

1.1. Definitions of Resilience

The concept of resilience is extremely complex, but fundamentally it encompasses an ability that signifies a certain adaptability, aimed at enabling the individual to maintain or restore their healthy mental state during challenging times (Wald et al., 2006).

Numerous scientific disciplines, such as psychology, sociology, and the biological sciences, study resilience in relation to their particular field. As a result, there is no unified resilience theory, as each scientific discipline understands the concept from a different perspective. From the perspective of the study, the question of resilience focuses on how vulnerable groups in the affected areas, especially minors, are able to withstand the challenges posed by armed conflicts and natural disasters without suffering negative physical or mental health consequences. Additionally, for prevention purposes, the study's aim is to develop flexible resilience by recognizing the characteristics of human trafficking, which can help avoid further deterioration of mental health (Bonanno, 2007: 20–28). In a narrow sense, the definition of resilience considers it a personal trait that follows the experience of a sudden, short-term trauma. Early research on resilience primarily focused on the strength of tools and abilities, particularly those intellectual-based abilities that aid survival skills (Klohn, 1996: 1067–1079).

Over time, the list of these challenges has been expanded to include any negative events that occur during life and can be clearly linked to a lack of resilient adaptive capacity, as well as the development of other mental illnesses. Such negative events include inadequate parenting, poverty or lack of adequate housing, traumatic events, natural disasters, any form of violence, war, and certain physical illnesses. Furthermore, later research has also addressed the relationship between resilience and communities, such as family or any other group, and concluded that the ability to be resilient is significantly enhanced by the connection to these communities, meaning that individuals with strong family ties can cope more easily with emerging

difficulties. Moreover, some studies confirm the fact that a supportive, compassionate parental background experienced in early childhood definitely enhances the development of resilience skills and can mitigate the impact of harmful environmental factors and influences on mental health (Gunnar, 2006: 651–677). Accordingly, the definition of resilience can also be interpreted as a protective capacity that can be understood at the community, family and individual levels (Rutter, 2006: 1–12).

From the 1970s onward, the resilience approach—specifically, the integrative or evolutionary kind of resilience—slowly permeated and influenced the methods of other fields. The theory of general systems, or even the creation of heuristic theoretical models of ecology, is one area of influence that cuts across conventional academic boundaries. The latter is the result of either the criteria based model created by Costanza et al. (Costanza et al., 1997: 253–260) for the unification of various concepts to describe and understand human and natural processes, or the panarchy model created by Gunderson and Holling (2002), which explains the transformations of human and natural systems in a unified system. Another branch of the effect can be found in a variety of fields and applied research, such as the interdisciplinary study of property rights or anthropology, where the authors used it as a foundation for Rappaport's theory (1967), which also described culture as a state of equilibrium (Roy & Ungar, 2008: 218–235) as a result of research in Papua New Guinea.

C.S. Holling's work in ecology can be defined as one of the first disciplines that studied resilience. Prior to Holling (2002) and his colleagues, researchers thought of ecological systems as linear, reductive systems, with recovery coming from focused interventions meant to reverse negative effects. Holling (2002) acknowledged that the system itself, wherever the horizon of analysis is drawn, is adaptive and changing, so its recovery should not be measured against an imagined baseline. On the one hand, the rate of change of a system's components can vary by several orders of magnitude, making it impractical to detect complex changes. However, because of the intricate interactions between these elements, quick and drastic interventions may result in unanticipated states and processes. Psychology, one of the disciplines that deals with people, described resilience as the capacity to cope with trauma as early as the 1950s. (Seery et al., 2010: 1025–1041). However, the theoretical foundation of this study, which started to address the issue largely in terms of the interaction between the living environment and human activities, appears to have been influenced by more by ecological thought. The evident influence of human alterations to the environment in the latter half of the 20th century has also drawn attention to concerns of habitat preservation and sustainability. Observations have prompted inquiries on the capacity of ecosystems to recuperate from specific crises or disasters and whether such recovery is feasible. The idea of resistance is one way to address a very specific

problem, but it quickly became apparent that it is not always appropriate for explaining processes in the real world.

At this point in the discussion, the term resilience—which encompasses both the resilience and the resistance component—was born. Although the meanings differ greatly based on the authors and the field of application, there is a fundamental duality in meaning, which is further demonstrated by the fact that there are two synonyms used in many languages instead of a single word equivalent, adaptable resilience (Ribiczey, 2008: 161–171).

The narrative that links resilience to the capacity for resistance and adaptation also illustrates a deeper and more difficult duality of human needs in resilience discourses. It stems from the significance of both security and change, as well as the conflicting and difficult demands on both. Regarding the environmental problems, resilience can be determined as recovering ability to its original state or a relatively similar condition. On the other hand, flexible adaptation highlights and builds upon the capacity for renewal that results from change. Instead of focusing on identifying and keeping constants, this environment based theory emphasizes the emergence and production of new traits, the quest for development opportunities, and the concept of self-progression in an uncertain and dynamically changing world (Chandler & Lanham, 2016: 78–81).

1.2. Other factors influencing resilience

In the study of resilience, it was concluded that positive stress is important for healthy mental development; however, the proper development of resilience is more likely in an environment where individuals are not subjected to constant emotional strain and have a supportive family background. Additionally, the development of resilience is influenced by certain personality traits such as optimism, openness, healthy self-esteem, adaptability or cooperativeness. At the same time, studies indicate that age, ethnic background, and gender-based divisions do not significantly influence the acquisition of resilience, although certain life stages can be significant influencing factors (Joseph & Linley, 2006: 1041–1053).

When examining the concept of resilience, it is worth mentioning additional environmental factors that influence the possibility of developing resilience, such as positively influential social environment, in addition to a balanced family background, as well as stable relationships with peers or a supportive teacher. It cannot be emphasized enough that those later abused or exploited children who experienced a protected mother-child attachment, where the mother did not suffer from any mental or substance abuse disorders, acquire resilience much more easily and thus manage the mental challenges following traumas more easily. Furthermore, significant assistance can be provided to these vulnerable groups through participation in good

schools, sports and arts opportunities, or communities associated with religion and other cultural features (Luthar et al., 2000: 543–562).

1.3. NATO guidelines for the development of resilience-based practices

NATO considers building resilience capabilities as a priority, as it believes that NATO member states must be resilient in order to respond appropriately to any shock-like, sudden changes, whether in the case of armed conflicts, natural disasters, or critical infrastructure failures. In this context, the interpretation of resilience is specific, meaning the development of individual and collective capabilities to prepare, respond, and quickly recover from such events, thereby ensuring the continuity of the Alliance's specialized, coordinated activities. NATO emphasizes that one of the foundations of the collective defense they have formulated is the preparedness of civilians and cooperation with civilians, which is based on developing the resilience capacity of those civilians. Therefore, NATO supports the development of civilians' flexible resilience in various ways. In this context, Article 3 of the North Atlantic Treaty elaborates on the significance and support of resilience, with the primary aim of protecting society, the population, and shared values.

“In order more effectively to achieve the objectives of this Treaty, the Parties, separately and jointly, by means of continuous and effective self-help and mutual aid, will maintain and develop their individual and collective capacity to resist armed attack.” (NATO, 1949/2023)

According to NATO's interpretation, the flexible resilience of civilians has several objectives, the most fundamental of which is to continuously provide governmental functions for the affected area or community, ensuring the provision of essential services for the civilian population, and also to ensure certain civilian cooperation for the necessary military operations. Civil-military cooperation is the foundation of resilient resilience, as it influences essential tools for successful crisis management, such as transportation and communication (Roepke & Thankey, 2019).

The development of resilience capabilities was articulated by the Allied leaders at the 2016 Warsaw Summit, where an agreement was reached on the significant role of flexible resilience for the Allies. To this end, NATO's resilience must be increased to face any type of challenge (NATO, 2016). The primary basis for developing this capability is that resilience must first be developed and supported at the individual level to withstand any form of armed attack, disaster or other sudden adverse effects. Along these guidelines, the following points must be kept in mind: guarantee the continuation of government and essential services, such as the capacity to decide and interact with citizens during an emergency; resilient energy sources: guaranteeing a steady flow of energy and having contingency measures to handle interruptions;

capacity to successfully manage uncontrolled migration and de-conflict these migrations from NATO military installations; water and food resources that are resilient: making sure that supplies are safe from interruption or sabotage; the capacity to handle disruptive health emergencies and large-scale casualties: making sure that adequate medical supplies are stored and safe; that civilian health systems can handle the situation; and the ability of telecommunications and cyber networks to continue operating with adequate backup capacity even in times of crisis is known as resilient civil communications systems. This also entails the requirement for dependable communications networks, such as 5G, strong backup plans, first access to national authorities during emergencies, and comprehensive evaluations of all communications system threats. Also important are resilient transport systems, making sure that civilian services can depend on transportation networks even during emergencies and that NATO military can move quickly across Alliance territory (NATO, 2016).

To strengthen civil resilience as formulated by NATO, further agreements were reached at the 2021 Brussels Summit, during which NATO committed to additional obligations and guidelines regarding resilience. The main points include ensuring and diversifying supply chains, securing critical infrastructure, and addressing challenges arising from natural hazards (Coffey & Kochis, 2021). In the same year, the NATO 2030 program (agenda) formulated by the Alliance was published, which outlines specific principles and tasks regarding resilience, and also includes the designation of high-ranking officials responsible for resilience, who are in charge of resilience-type regional efforts and cooperation with NATO (NATO, 2020). Thereafter, in 2022, NATO established a new senior Resilience Committee, which absorbed the jobs and responsibilities of the Civil Emergency Planning Committee (Bolstad & Jakobsen, 2022). The task of the Resilience Committee is to coordinate NATO resilience-type tasks and define strategic plans and tasks. The Committee is responsible for the development and management of resilience related to disinformation and critical infrastructure. Then, following this, in 2023, based on the Vilnius Summit program, the Alliance strengthened development strategies related to resilience for the civilian population (Monaghan et al., 2023). At the 2024 Washington Summit, efforts were already being made to deepen cooperation with other allied partners who are also committed to building resilient resilience, particularly with the European Union (Larsen & Janeliunas, 2024).

1.4. Summary

Based on the guidelines developed over the past few years, it can be stated that resilience is a skill based on strong cooperation between civil and military organizations, and also communities, which brings mutual benefits both in peacetime and in crisis situations. This is an extremely important factor for NATO, as the main

goal of the Alliance is to unite military and civilians during conflicts and challenges. The Alliance recognizes that civilian support is essential for managing crises, maintaining NATO's effective military capabilities during crises, and ensuring access to critical services and infrastructure.

2. Defining the characteristics and manifestations of human trafficking in the Sahel region based on international guidelines

2.1. Interpretation of human trafficking

Pursuant to Article 3 of Regulation 55/25 of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, concluded in Palermo on 12 December 2000, the following definitions apply to human trafficking: victim collection-recruitment, transportation, hiding, coercion, restraint, seduction, physical abuse (UNODOC, 2000: 42). Human trafficking can be understood as a crime in which women and children are the primary victims of sexual exploitation. However, the scope of succeeding accords already includes both sexes: human trafficking can affect both men and women. Nonetheless, research and political pronouncements highlight that women and girls are the majority of victims of human trafficking for the purpose of material sexual exploitation (UNODC, 2020). Many cases are not identified as human trafficking since countries have different criminal laws and cultural traditions. Instead, the exploited victims are punished like criminals. Plenty of people who flee the disaster-affected area end up being victims of human trafficking because they are left in a precarious situation where they are unable to control their own fate and must rely on the traffickers.

The solution involves a preventive measure whereby nations implement a standardized criterion to address violators uniformly across all countries. An exemplary instance is the 2011 convention of the European Commission titled 'Report on the Progress Made in the Fight Against Trafficking in Human Beings', which establishes uniform criteria for each Member State regarding the identification and prosecution of offenders, as well as the rehabilitation of victims, culminating in 2016 with additional provisions (COM (2016) 267 final, 2016).

2.2. NATO- human trafficking policy

Due to the complex characteristics of human trafficking, the fight against exploitation has been part of the role of armed forces in recent years. NATO first summarized a directive on human trafficking in 2004, titled 'NATO Policy on Combating Trafficking in Human Beings', which is both guiding and mandatory for allied states and outlines specific tasks, application areas, and actors. The directive considers prevention as a primary task in the fight against human trafficking, which is based on preliminary education and training, summarized in the document 'NATO Guidance for the Development of Training and Educational Programmes to Support the Policy on Combating the Trafficking in Human Beings' (NATO, 2012). Furthermore, the program

'NATO Guidelines on Combating THB for Military and Civilian Personnel Deployed in NATO-led Operations' (Ballesteros, 2007: 121-139) summarizes and presents the details of specific operational activities, emphasizing the importance of coordinated operations between civilians and armed forces. Then, subsequently, within the framework of the Warsaw Summit, another directive aimed at combating human trafficking was adopted, the NATO Policy for the Protection of Civilians document, whose primary goal is to "[...] define a coherent, consistent, and integrated approach to the protection of civilians." (NATO, 2016) The NATO Policy on Preventing and Responding to Sexual Exploitation and Abuse adopted in 2019 (NATO, 2019) already identifies specific truths based on the interconnections between sexual exploitation and human trafficking which constitutes a significant part of prevention. Furthermore, within the framework of prevention, it draws attention to the identification of early indicators, even before the report of exploitation, and emphasizes the importance of informing the affected population about the recognition and risks of human trafficking.

Moreover, the directive also states a very important fact regarding exploitation, namely that the potential imprisonment or confinement of the exploited person can only worsen the traumas caused by the exploitation, meaning that each victim is entitled to health, mental, or other essential services without discrimination. Overall, both armed and non-government organization members need to be made aware of the characteristics necessary for recognizing human trafficking, which would allow for the identification of not only the victims but also the perpetrators who participate in human trafficking as members of an organization.

2.3. The emergence of human trafficking in the Sahel region

The region of the Sahel has undeniably encountered severe humanitarian challenges in recent years, the repercussions of which continue to be experienced: many of these issues endure today. The prevalent and devastating armed conflicts have led to considerable social transformations, including a substantial exodus of individuals from violence, many of whom have fallen prey to human trafficking. (UNODC, 2023). The actions of violent extremist groups, including Boko Haram, DAESH, and Al-Qaeda-affiliated entities, have resulted in unparalleled illicit travel patterns and people trafficking across the region, particularly affecting Cameroon, Chad and Nigeria. Moreover, internal displacements in these locations have surged, increasing from 217,000 in 2013 to 2.1 million by 2021, compelling individuals to abandon their residences and consequently amplifying a wave of movement that human traffickers are actively exploiting (Cheshirkov, 2022). Human trafficking in the Sahel region presents an extremely significant challenge, as it involves trafficking perpetrated by both organized crime groups and terrorist organizations. While appropriate local government measures and guidelines could be effective counters to organized crime, combating human trafficking in relation to terrorist groups requires

the development of a much more complex and intensive flexible resilience. Furthermore, it is essential that a significant distinction be made regarding human trafficking perpetrated by these organizations, as the primary profile and source of income for organized criminals is exploitation, while human trafficking, although a significant part of terrorist organizations' activities, cannot be considered their primary goal. Despite their primary goals and motivations, terrorist organizations and organized crime networks occasionally cooperate, meaning that members of terrorist organizations sometimes provide protection to traffickers belonging to organized crime networks. In many cases, terrorist groups also receive food and shelter from organized crime networks (Lounnas, 2018: 4). Thus, the number of vulnerable groups in the region has significantly increased, with minors being particularly highlighted amongst them, many of whom have lost their parents during armed conflicts or who have even been forcibly taken .

Complex forms of human trafficking are generally employed simultaneously by terrorist groups, meaning that children are used as slaves in armed operations and for other forced labor, as well as for sexual exploitation (Malakooti, 2020). However, due to certain sociocultural norms, female children are more intensively affected by sexual violence and other forms of sexual abuse, while male children mostly become victims of forced recruitment into armed groups (UNICEF, 2019). Despite their different goals, there is evidence that terrorist organizations and organized crime groups occasionally cooperate. While terrorist organizations sometimes provide protection to smugglers, terrorist groups receive food and shelter from smugglers, so both parties cooperate to exploit vulnerable individuals. Most terrorist organizations are attracted not only by human trafficking but also by the opportunities for livestock breeding, fishing and agriculture available in the region, making the Sahel a region that encompasses extremely complex problems characterized by the challenges generated by ongoing wars, displacement, smuggling and human trafficking (Daouda, 2020). The control and eradication of human trafficking perpetrated by terrorist groups is complicated by the fact that the activities of these groups cannot be held accountable under any international agreement or directive, as terrorist groups, being non-state armed organizations, are not members of any international organization. Therefore, only international law has the authority to hold these organizations responsible. based on Article 3 of the 1949 Geneva Conventions, but it is often unable to apply significant measures against terrorist organizations (Saul, 2017: 39–66).

The elimination of human trafficking and, concurrently, armed conflicts would also require a proper and stable state, which is a significant deficiency in the region. One of the biggest problems is that while guidelines and agreements concerning human rights emphasize the obligation to protect those affected during conflict situations, most of these guidelines barely address the activities of terrorist

organizations (Jespersen, 2019). One of the most important guidelines is contained in Article 38 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which states that states must ensure that "the rules of international humanitarian law applicable to them are respected and ensured in relation to children in armed conflicts." (UNITED NATIONS, 1990) The legislation includes one of the most important factors regarding human trafficking, which is that children under 15 years of age cannot be recruited into armed forces. However, this legislation does not address the connection between terrorist organizations and the exploitation of children, just like most guidelines protecting children's rights, which is a significant shortcoming and problem in combating human trafficking. The Optional Protocol to the Convention contains a significant addition stating that armed groups, which are separate from a state's armed forces, may under no circumstances recruit or use persons under the age of 18 in hostilities (UNITED NATIONS, 2020): nevertheless, this directive still does not address the role of terrorist organizations (Ryngaert, 2008: 355–381). However, in addition to this UN guideline, other legislation also addresses the protection of children and the prevention of human trafficking in Africa, including the Sahel region. Such a guideline is the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights adopted in 1981, which fundamentally draws attention to the protection of human rights. Although it does not specifically outline measures to combat human trafficking, Article 5 provides a clear reference to the characteristics of human trafficking, mentioning "forms of human exploitation and degradation, particularly slavery, slave trade, torture, cruel, inhuman or degrading punishment and treatment." (Ogunniyi & Idowu, 2022: 165-185). Further details on the fight against human trafficking and the exploitation of minors are contained in Article 11 of the 2003 Maputo Protocol and the 1990 African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child.

Subsequently, in 2016, a significant resolution was adopted by the United Nations Security Council (UNITED NATIONS, 2016) regarding the fight against human trafficking in the Sahel region, which condemns "any act of trafficking in persons, in particular the sale or trafficking of persons" for the purpose of sexual slavery and forced labor by terrorist groups operating in the Sahel region, including Boko Haram.

Despite the existence of these guidelines, we can say overall that even in Nigeria, which is considered the most stable country in the Sahel region, the initiation of legal proceedings by the affected victims aimed at condemning traffickers is not unusual, despite the clear increase in the number of sexually exploited women and children in the area (Onomrerhinor & Aimienrovbiye, 2019: 90–97). Additionally, the fight against human trafficking is complicated by the fact that much of the region lacks stable government and effective law enforcement agencies, legal norms, and many countries have even lost control over certain areas, which are now mostly controlled by armed groups, and often terrorist organizations (Brown, 2018). At the same time, the lack of an adequate fight against human trafficking not only highlights regional-

level shortcomings, we can clearly state that international humanitarian law does not regulate and address exploitation in the region properly.

2.4. Summary

Essentially, the greatest shortcoming and flaw of the guidelines regarding human trafficking and exploitation is that most of them pertain to state agencies, thus they are unable to regulate human trafficking perpetrated by terrorist organizations, so this continues to increase the potential for the exploitation by vulnerable groups. Overall, it can be said that due to the instability of the region and the lack of governmental organizations, only the guidelines and rights enshrined in international law can be enforced against terrorist organizations. Although the enforcement of victims' rights is limited in relation to terrorist organizations, the greatest assistance for the victims can be provided by the aforementioned guidelines, along with Article II of the 1977 Additional Protocol to Article 3 of the Geneva Convention (UNITED NATIONS, 1949/1977), which clearly indicates the connection between terrorist organizations and human trafficking, thereby reinforcing the significance of what is stipulated in international law and its potential applicability in addressing the challenges faced in the region.

3. The relationship of certain cultural and social norms regarding the exploitation of women and child victims

In any crisis situation, women and girls are disproportionately affected by sexual violence, including forced marriage, exploitation, and human trafficking. During such times, they have limited access to any type of assistance. In the Sahel region, families are often torn apart due to frequent conflicts and forced displacements, as well as the abduction of children, primarily by terrorist organizations, whose main goal is to involve them in armed conflicts for sexual exploitation. Girls are particularly affected by any form of sexual violence, as they are more frequently forced into child marriage, and the likelihood of early pregnancy is extremely high in this case. Furthermore, a characteristic of this region is that girl children are often responsible for providing their families with food and water, which, as resources are scarce, in some cases must be obtained from places extremely far from their homes. This forces them to travel long distances alone, where they often become victims of sexual violence (UNITED NATIONS, 2024). The situation of women and girls in the Sahel is also fundamentally complicated by the norms and customs established by culture, which fundamentally discriminates against women and girls in terms of their personal and other rights. This particular situation yet further is complicated if the affected children are separated from their homes or families after the conflict, whether through evacuation or abduction by terrorist organizations. These affected children suffer lifelong trauma, which undoubtedly complicates the process of reintegration into society, as they struggle with significant physical and mental harm and, due to certain cultural norms, a lack of

coping strategies. Moreover, in many cases, due to societal stigma, they prefer to remain silent about what happened to them, so even if members of international or any humanitarian organizations offer help, they do not take advantage of the opportunity, whether it be psychosocial or health assistance (Gaye, 2018).

3.1. Summary

Overall, it can be said that there is a clear relationship between the lack of food and water and forced displacements, which increases the presence of terrorist organizations in the region, posing a clear threat to children. Therefore, a significant part of resilience-based humanitarian crisis management should include child protection, supplemented by psychosocial support, community-based protection practices and case management practices, which primarily provide assistance during preventive processes but can also initiate and support the rehabilitation process. It is extremely important to emphasize that psychosocial support and access to certain justice mechanisms and opportunities must be provided to social workers or members of humanitarian organizations working with affected minors, and this should be brought to the attention of vulnerable groups living in the region in advance. International organizations and other institutional systems must recognize that they need to act together and in coordination against the violation of children's rights and the exploitation of children resulting from crisis situations, primarily within the framework of preventive, educational humanitarian programs.

4. Conclusion

The challenges that have arisen in the Sahel region in recent years have now evolved into global challenges, with the participation of children in armed conflicts or their abduction for the purpose of sexual exploitation being particularly noteworthy. Based on experience, it is an undeniable fact that there is a significant relationship between food shortages caused by climate change, forced displacements, and human trafficking. The fight against the complex problems in the region can be facilitated by the development and practical implementation of resilience-based programs, which are addressed by numerous scientific fields and are interpreted by NATO as a top priority during crisis management, as outlined in various guidelines over the past years.

The sexual exploitation perpetrated by terrorist organizations or organized crime groups in the Sahel region is facilitated by unstable or non-existent states. Accordingly, despite the numerous existing international guidelines aimed at protecting children, the lack of appropriate legal norms and enforcement agencies in the region limits the protection of children's personal rights. Furthermore, local cultural norms and customs also make it difficult to prevent or address exploitation for those affected victims. To eliminate this, significant solutions can be provided by the

cooperation between civilians (humanitarian aid organizations and the affected population) and military organizations (NATO), the importance of which NATO has also emphasized in numerous directives discussing resilience, and in recent years, it has formulated several directives.

The extremely complex challenges experienced in the Sahel region require appropriate crisis management practices, which can be based on developing flexible resilience among vulnerable groups. In addressing the challenge, a significant distinction must be made between human trafficking perpetrated by organized criminals and terrorists. Due to the lack of enforceable international legislation against terrorists, humanitarian aid groups and Allied members face significant challenges in reaching these victims, resulting in inadequate care and assistance for these children and women. Since many unstable regions of the Sahel lack reliable judicial and enforcement institutions, communities must be equipped to confront the hazards of human trafficking with resilience, encompassing both parents and children. Violent conflict brought about by terrorist groups and others increase the risk of forcible relocation which in turn means a higher risk of sexual exploitation of minors, both situations that will have long-term implication for the health and mental well-being of the victims.

Humanitarian aid organizations, in collaboration with NATO, can draw attention to the importance of this by coordinating existing guidelines and implementing resilience-based programs that are adapted to the cultural and social norms of the affected region.

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PART III: REGIONAL SECURITY CHALLENGES

CHAPTER 20

The Chad Humanitarian and Forced Migration Situation: A Hungarian experience

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Abstract

This study examines the humanitarian and forced migration situation of Chad, a crisis affecting 3.9 million people, including refugees from Sudan, Central African Republic and Cameroon, from the perspective of Hungarian humanitarian and development initiatives. Operating through strategic cooperation with the Hungary Helps Agency, Hungarian Baptist Aid (HBAid) implemented targeted interventions across multiple sectors. This chapter analyzes HBAid's dual approach to humanitarian assistance and development projects, particularly focusing on refugee support and capacity building in the healthcare and education sectors. Through qualitative assessment of multiple intervention sites, including the Kalambari and Guilmey refugee camps, the study documents HBAid's implementation of sustainable solutions in vocational training, healthcare delivery, and infrastructure development.

More specifically, the assessment of multiple intervention sites demonstrates HBAid's impact through the establishment of optical centers in the N'Djamena and Moundou Hospitals; delivery of specialized training for 40 IT professionals; implementation of sustainable sewing programs across four locations; and infrastructure development including solar energy systems at the Guinebor 2 Hospital which serves 172,000 people. The study documents critical operational challenges in Chad's complex environment, where only 22 percent of rural births receive qualified medical assistance, and where telecommunications infrastructure remains severely limited with 0.68 mobile connections per person.

Key findings demonstrate the necessity and effectiveness of integrated programming that simultaneously serves refugee and host communities while building local capacity through sustainable infrastructure and skills development, exemplified by successful sewing training programs and vision care initiatives. The research

identifies critical operational challenges, including bureaucratic challenges, security concerns and infrastructure limitations, while highlighting the importance of strategic partnerships with local authorities and international organizations for project sustainability. This analysis provides evidence-based insights for NGOs operating in the Sahel region, highlighting the correlation between security protocols and aid worker safety in conflict zones, noting that 33 percent of international staff incidents occur within the first three months of deployment. The findings underscore the necessity of comprehensive risk assessments, cultural sensitivity, and sustainable project design in humanitarian operations within the Sahel region.

Keywords: *humanitarian assistance, development, aid, Sahel, Chad, Hungary, refugee support, capacity building, security, operational challenges, sustainable interventions*

1. General humanitarian context in Chad

The Republic of Chad, a landlocked country in Central Africa, faces a complex and alarming humanitarian situation. Factors such as armed conflict, political instability, massive population displacements, food shortages, disease and environmental challenges contribute to a multidimensional humanitarian crisis that has a profound effect on the country's inhabitants. This situation is exacerbated by a combination of endemic factors and temporary crises, making the humanitarian response particularly difficult (UN OCHA, 2024b; Besenyő 2019). Four major crises directly affect 3.9 million people in Chad. First, 32 percent of the population, i.e. 5.8 million people, 51% of whom are women, need multifaceted humanitarian assistance. More than 3.4 million people are affected by food insecurity and malnutrition, including 663,000 who are severely food insecure. Second, 550,000 people have been directly affected by population movements, including refugees, returnees, and internally displaced persons. Of these, 55% are women and 60% are children under the age of 18. By December 2024, the number of forcibly displaced persons climbed to 1.8 million including 1.2 million refugees (UNHCR TCHAD, 2025). Third, the health situation is characterised by the prevalence of diseases with epidemic potential such as cholera and measles, while other diseases, such as malaria, impact the country where access to healthcare is poor. Finally, natural disasters (floods, drought, crop pests) are recurrent and increasingly frequent, and could affect up to 2.7 million people. The humanitarian situation in Chad is complex and worrying, marked by a number of inter-dependent issues, including the food crisis, insecurity and armed conflict, socio-economic vulnerability and forced displacement. 36.8 percent of the country's workers and their families live on less than 1.90 US dollars per person per day (UN OCHA, 2024. p. 11).

2. Introduction of Hungarian Baptist Aid

Starting in the second half of 2023, the Hungarian Baptist Aid participated in the complex humanitarian aid and development mission in Chad, in the framework of strategic cooperation with the Hungary Helps Agency (HHA). The HHA opened its office in N'Djamena in January 2024, with the aim to strengthen the stability of Chad and the Sahel region, by providing humanitarian and development projects. HBAid, as an implementing partner of HHA, actively participated in the implementation of various humanitarian aid and development projects and programs throughout Chad. The main purpose of this section is to present a comprehensive and realistic picture of the tasks performed by HBAid, addressing both successes and challenges. The secondary purpose of this article is to serve as a guide for other non-governmental organizations that may plan to carry out relief work in Chad in the future.

Hungarian Baptist Aid is a humanitarian relief and development organisation – a registered priority charity in Hungary – providing aid, relief, humanitarian and spiritual assistance for the needy, vulnerable and socially outcast in order to alleviate poverty, ease their difficult situation, while striving to create an opportunity for a life with dignity, regardless of nationality, race, religion, political or social affiliation of the beneficiaries.

HBAid – beyond general provision of aid and relief – focuses its professional activities towards the physically or mentally challenged or disabled, refugees, homeless, drug addicts, HIV/AIDS victims and natural disaster victims. HBAid supports many other fields of specialized humanitarian and development work, including assisting persons in need, people affected by disaster, family support, elderly care, promoting social equality for disadvantaged groups, while also supporting refugees and facilitating their integration. HBAid subscribing to the principles of the Code of Conduct acknowledges and confirms that the humanitarian imperative comes first, aid is given regardless of the race, creed or nationality of the recipients and without adverse distinction of any kind. Aid priorities are calculated on the basis of need alone and, furthermore, aid will not be used to further a particular political or religious standpoint.

Hungarian Baptist Aid serves over 15,000 people in its social institutions in Hungary and provides education to 14,500 students in its 42 schools. Internationally, HBAid has worked in 65 countries in humanitarian crises, disaster, complex emergencies and wars, including Cambodia, Vietnam, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, Afghanistan, Mongolia, North Korea, India, Iran, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Western Sahara, Malawi, Congo, Haiti, Ukraine, Romania, Serbia, Albania, Kosovo and others.

HBAid staff are 200 HQ employees, with an additional 2,500 staff in different social and educational institutions, who are trained and experienced humanitarian relief workers, social workers, teachers, medical doctors, nurses, conductors (using

Pető conductive education to treat and teach disabled people), search and rescue specialists, lawyers, engineers, PR experts and interpreters.

3. The Chad refugee context in brief

Chad is located in the Sahel region, also known as the hunger belt of Africa, and is currently perhaps one of the most significant states in the region. The conflicts and civil wars raging for many years in the neighbouring countries – the Central African Republic, Sudan, and Libya – and furthermore the presence and activity of the terrorist organization Boko Haram in Cameroon, Niger and Nigeria, have left their mark on the quality of life of the people living in the region. Many people fled from the fighting in the region to Chad, which is still considered a stable country today, and therefore, these population movements apply an additional burden on the country. Chad hosts 1.8 million forcibly displaced persons (UNHCR TCHAD, 2025), facing limited resources. While humanitarian aid continues, integration of development efforts and strengthened self-reliance are crucial. During the discussions with the local government bodies, officials of almost all the ministries emphasized that the humanitarian projects shall not exclusively be aimed at refugees, but also serve the needs of the host community, since the local residents living in the vicinity of the refugee camps often live in similar conditions as refugees. As a result of the refugee influx, the sudden increase in population in some areas strained the availability of basic resources (drinking water, food, energy, shelter, etc.) which are not sufficient for either the refugees, or for the host community. Humanitarian actors must strive to avoid an unfortunate adverse effect, conflict between the displaced population and the host communities.

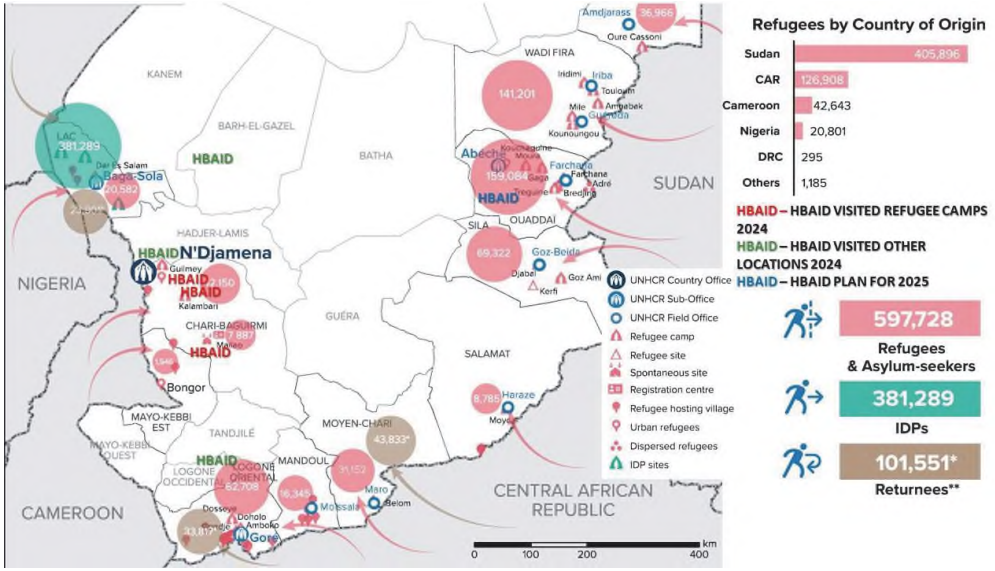
Considering the above request and humanitarian principles, HBAid makes every effort to carry out sustainable solutions during both the planning and the implementation of humanitarian assistance and development projects. Within the framework of humanitarian action, we can identify two primary areas of challenge that sometimes overlap. These two areas are immediate humanitarian assistance and long-term development projects. Many humanitarian organizations, as well as HBAid, are active in both areas, providing humanitarian assistance, as well as development activities in Chad.

Below, you may see the Comparison of Humanitarian Assistance and Rehabilitation/ Development Assistance table (Szilágyi, Horváthné Angyal and Gál, 2022, page 28.).

Comparison of Humanitarian Assistance and Rehabilitation/ Development Assistance	Humanitarian Assistance	Rehabilitation / Development Assistance
Goals	Reduction of mortality and morbidity, alleviation of deprivation	Economic growth and poverty reduction through capacity building and sustainability
Implementation	Fast	Slow
Decision making	Reactive	Proactive
Period	Shorter	Longer
Context	Natural or man-made crises	In developing countries
Occasion of intervention	In a crisis situation	Any time
Mechanism of operation	Filling immediate and direct needs	Causal treatment
Media	High level of media interest	Low level of media interest
Aid workers	Often international	Mainly local employees
Intervention logic	Case-by-case	Multidimensional
Visibility of results	Visible in the short term	Visible in the longer term, more difficult to measure

4. Refugees and refugee camps

According to a UNHCR report (UNHCR TCHAD, 2025) released in January 2025, Chad hosts more than 1.8 million forcibly displaced people, including 1.2 refugees from conflicts in neighbouring Sudan, the Central African Republic and Cameroon. More than 125,000 refugees and asylum seekers from the Central African Republic have fled to Chad escaping different waves of violence since 2005. There is a clear and immediate need for extensive humanitarian assistance in Chad, and this is therefore the largest operation of the UN specialized agencies in the region. With the support of other UN agencies and 40 non-governmental organizations, UNHCR leads and coordinates the refugee response in support of the Government of Chad.



Source: Data abstracted by the author from UNHCR documents (UNHCR CHAD, 2023)

HBAid visited the following refugee camps:

Kalambari refugee camp

The Kalambari camp is south of N'Djamena, in the vicinity of Kalambari, a village located to the west of the Koundoul sub-prefecture. According to the Commission Nationale pour l'Accueil et la Réinsertion des Réfugiés et des Rapatriés (CNARR)⁷⁸ representative (M. Idriss Mahamat Ali Abdallah Nassour, head of CNARR), the Kalambari camp is a refuge for Cameroonian refugees who fled inter-community violence in the far north of Cameroon. This inter-community conflict pits several ethnic groups against each other, namely the Arabs with the Mousgoumes, Massa and other ethnic groups. The Mousgoumes and Massas are farmers and fishermen. The camp is 40.9 hectares in size and is made up of two zones, A and B, with 17 blocks, 100 to 155 households per block, 1850 shelters with 2860 households in total, and 9550 refugees, according to the UNHCR. The camp has 20 boreholes, 19 washing areas, 169 garbage bags, 438 latrines, a health center, a school, a registration center, a children's and women's area, and a market.

Guilmey refugee camp

The Guilmey camp is home to Cameroonian refugees who fled the town of Kousseri in December 2021, following a deadly inter-communal violence between Arabs and Mousgoumes, Massa and several other ethnic groups. Guilmey is a village

⁷⁸ National Commission for the Reception and Reintegration of Refugees and Repatriates

located 5 km from Farcha in the 1st arrondissement of the city of N'Djamena. It has a surface area of 11 hectares subdivided into 6 blocks, with 711 shelters, 138 households, and a total of 4,657 refugees. Each block has a block leader, and the camp has a president or delegate. Refugees in the Guilmei camp have set up activity groups and committees to represent them in dealings with CNARR (Head of CNARR) and its partners. The camp operates a health center, a school, a children's center, a women's center, and a market.

Several national and international organizations work closely with CNARR in the camps to assist refugees:

- International Organization for Migration (IOM): refugee assistance
- United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR): refugee protection
- World Food Programme (WFP): assistance and food security
- APLFT: deals with GBV (gender-based violence)
- Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS): education and child protection
- INTERSOS: AGR, border monitoring and reforestation
- LM International (LMI): "WASH" water sanitation and hygiene
- Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS): child protection and GBV
- International Rescue Committee (IRC): health
- International Committee for Relief and Development (CIAUD): emergency aid and empowerment
- Chad Red Cross (CRT): shelters and distribution
- Unité Nutritionnelle Ambulatoire (Ambulatory Nutrition Unit- UNA): nutrition

5. HBAid's activities in these camps

Sewing training

HBAid organized a 4-week intensive sewing and clothing repair training for refugees. The students who completed the training 'leased' sewing machines for 3 years for free, including a raw material starter package, with the aim of empowering them to start a small business that offers them and their families with sustainable and increasing independence. In the mentoring phase following the training, the trainer monitored and supported the start of the small business for a month. Even beyond that phase, the contact with the graduated students is still ongoing. The students will receive the sewing machines as a donation after the 3-year 'leasing' contract expires. In the refugee camps, the sewing machines were placed in a designated room, where

the graduates can support each other as a social cooperative (Mr. Sandor Horvath, HBAid's Chad project manager).

Vision examination

Hungarian specialists and local opticians previously trained by HBAid conducted eye and vision examinations for hundreds of refugees (women, men, and children). Serious cases (e.g. cataracts, cross-eyed vision) were reported to the head of the refugee camp. Nearly 40 percent of those examined had severely damaged eyes or vision problems. For the problems that can be remedied with glasses, the team provided the glasses as a free donation (Mr. Benedek Raak, HBAid's head optometrist).

Mailao refugee camp

The Mailao site is located 1 km South-West of Mailao City, opposite a reception centre called CARM. The distance from N'djamena to Mailao is approximately 65 km. The Mailao site was made up exclusively of refugees from the Mousgoum community, who fled the December 2021 Arab-Mousgoum intercommunity conflict in Cameroon. It covers approximately 100 households. The site has been operational since the beginning of 2022, (M. Idriss Mahamat Ali Abdallah Nassour, head of CNARR).

Medical assistance

HBAid medical professionals, colleagues from the HBAid Rescue24 (search and rescue and emergency medical unit with Commander Laszlo Pavelcze) and other doctors participating in the mission, carried out medical reconnaissance in medical institutions and refugee camps to provide specific medical assistance in the southern border section of the country, including malaria control, infectious disease control, pediatric and general health assistance for hundreds of refugees on several occasions.

6. Higher Education: Humanitarian Response Manager specialized training

At the close of the second decade of the new millennium, there were more than 60 military, civilian and multidimensional peace operations worldwide under the auspices of international organizations or multilateral treaties. In addition to wars and armed conflicts, natural and human-instigated disasters contribute to the suffering of millions, to the loss of critical infrastructure and to the deterioration of security in many regions. While disasters and conflicts vary in nature, magnitude and impact, the affected communities are frequently unable to cope or only to a limited extent. In such cases, there is a need for rapid deployment and professional humanitarian operations management until the crisis situation is resolved. While countries with stronger economic positions may have the advantage of being better prepared for disaster

situations, the scale and uniqueness of a disaster can pose significant challenges even for more resilient states with advanced technology, infrastructure and institutions. To respond at the highest possible level, humanitarian operations necessitate highly skilled professionals with specialized knowledge to manage and lead them (Victoria Holt, Glyn Taylor, and Max Kelly: Protecting Civilians in the Context of UN Peacekeeping Operations, Successes, Setbacks and Remaining Challenges, 2009.).

Óbuda University (<https://uni-obuda.hu>) and Hungarian Baptist Aid with other partners have established the Humanitarian Response Manager specialized training (<https://bgk.uni-obuda.hu/en/humanitarian-response-manager-specialized-training>) that, therefore, aims to cultivate highly qualified professionals who possess specialized theoretical and practical knowledge in the management of humanitarian operations. These professionals will be equipped to respond effectively to the challenges posed by crisis situations and to integrate their existing expertise with additional competencies to address issues within their designated area of responsibility. Only a few universities offer such education, the most notable of which are Harvard, Fordham, Liverpool and the NOHA Network.

Óbuda University's Humanitarian Response Manager specialized training is a one-year post-graduate blended, on-line and in-person diploma course. Two intensive courses were provided in-person in Chad for refugee and IDP (Internally Displaced Person) camp managers, their deputies and colleagues, CNARR and other governmental agency employees, NGO (Non-Governmental Organization) employees, a total of 40 students. Some had vast experience accumulated over many years, while others were fairly new to the humanitarian work or specialized in only one sector.

The Humanitarian Response Manager training provided deep, extensive knowledge with a wide range of practical opportunities and group work. The following areas are taught (not a complete list): types of humanitarian crises, Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (<https://sdgs.un.org/goals>); humanitarian accountability; coordination of humanitarian action; personal and organizational safety; security management and planning; event and crisis management; vulnerable social groups; beneficiaries and their involvement in humanitarian action; protection of minorities; financing humanitarian action; fundraising; project cycle management, Monitoring & Evaluation; the role of religion in conflicts and cultural communication; Humanitarian Negotiations; Civil-Military co-operation (CIMIC); the International Legal Protection Regime.; the influence of illegal activities to humanitarian operations; human trafficking and smuggling; crimes against vulnerable groups; child soldiers; migration; refugees; IDPs; camp coordination and camp management; WASH (Water, Sanitation and Hygiene) (<https://www.unwater.org/water-facts/wash-water-sanitation-and-hygiene>);

nutrition; food aid and food security; shelter; health; logistics; prolonged crises; nation-building and post-conflict reconstruction; and humanitarian aid simulation.

However, it must be noted that one of the greatest strengths of the course is that the students who were also professionals at the same time worked closely with each other enriching their studies with their mutual experiences. Furthermore, they also provided vital and essential information and great cooperative assistance for the effectiveness and localisation of work of HBAid in Chad.

7. Humanitarian aid and development outside refugee camps

Infrastructural developments

Baba Moustapha Cultural Centre

As part of the development projects, HBAid renovated two training rooms in the Baba Moustapha Cultural Centre in the capital city, N'Djamena. The aim was to create an education and training base where working professionals, civil and governmental employees, the unemployed, as well as internally displaced persons and refugees may benefit from further educational opportunities. In one of the poorest countries in the world, where the daily challenges of the population are aggravated by the influx of millions of refugees, further education opportunities are considered an enormous advantage. (Mr. Abdoulaye Souleymane Ousman Babale, Ministry of Cultural Affairs, Historical Heritage, Tourism and Hand Crafts, General Secretary).

Hôpital Central de N'Djamena / Central Hospital N'Djamena

Hôpital Central de N'Djamena serves as a pivotal healthcare institution in the region. This hospital plays a crucial role in providing medical services and advancing public health initiatives within the community. It is recognized for its commitment to addressing various health challenges prevalent in the area, particularly infectious diseases (Africa Research Connect, n.d.). Hôpital Central de N'Djamena not only provides essential medical care but also engages in educational activities aimed at enhancing the skills of healthcare professionals. By fostering a collaborative environment, the hospital aims to improve healthcare delivery and outcomes for the people of Chad.

In the framework of the infrastructural improvements of the Ophthalmology department, HBAid renovated several examination rooms and patient rooms, in addition to donating medicines as well as optical and eye examination devices, which will be discussed later in the chapter.

Hopital Provincial de Moundou / Moundou Provincial Hospital

Moundou Provincial Hospital is a public healthcare institution located in a residential district to the South-West of the city of Moundou on the left bank of the Logone River, , covering an area of approximately 960,000 m². It is bordered to the

south by the Diaspora Hotel and the Hôtes. The (SNE) Société National d'Electricité and the (MCT) Manufacture des Cigarettes du Tchad are located to the West and the Adoum Dallah High school is to the North, to the East is the Collège d'Enseignement Général. It was created in the 1950s and has undergone various transformations like other public health facilities. It is under the supervision of the Ministry of Public Health and is part of the Logone Occidental regional health delegation. Moundou Provincial Hospital has the following departments: Emergency; General Medicine; Paediatrics; Surgery; Ophthalmology; Medical Imaging; Biomedical Analysis Laboratory; Pharmacy; Operating theatre; ARV dispensing unit; social services with a voluntary testing centre; Hygiene and sanitation, and a Maternity ward (Dr. Mahamat Ahmat Adoum Adjid, Moundou Hospital director).

HBAid carried out infrastructural improvements in the Ophthalmology department of the Mondou hospital, several examination rooms, patient rooms and water systems were renovated. In addition to the renovation, medicines and state-of-the-art optical and eye examination devices were donated.

Development of the solar energy storage capacity of Ginebur 2 Hospital and donation of oxygen concentrator equipment

Guinebor 2 Hospital (Ms. Lucia Bastos, hospital administrator, <https://www.healthservicecorps.org/hospital-location/chad/>) located on the western outskirts of N'Djamena, has been providing health-care services to surrounding communities since 2011. Currently a 70-bed hospital with a reputation for good quality and affordable surgery, it is continually growing and seeking to develop the range and quality of services it offers. Guinebor 2 Hospital (G2) serves a multi-ethnic local population of 172,000 and receives patients from multiple people groups across Chad, from neighbouring Cameroon, and sometimes even from Sudan and the Central African Republic (CAR). In a typical month, G2 Hospital will serve over 1,000 new out-patients, plus approximately 800 appointments for follow-up or dressing changes, 400 - 500 emergency cases and 200 in-patients. Each month, on average, they deliver 180 babies, complete 100 surgeries, 4,500 lab tests, 380 physiotherapy appointments and 450 ultrasounds. A wide spectrum of surgeries can be performed at G2 Hospital, including orthopedics, urological and abdominal surgeries. Chad remains one of the poorest and least developed countries in the world, and so malnutrition, malaria, and maternal/infant mortality are commonplace within the communities they serve.

In order to support the sustainability of the hospital and decrease operational costs, HBAid constructed a significant solar energy storage battery plant, extended the hospital's existing electricity production solar panel system and also donated two oxygen concentrators.

Health assistance and Education programs

As part of the immediate assistance, based on the protocol agreed upon with the Ministry of Health, several hospitals in the capital and also in some rural areas received donations of medicines, medical supplies and hospital equipment on several occasions in 2024 (Dr. Abdel-Madjid Abderahim Mahamat, Ministry of Public Health and Prevention of the Republic of Chad). In addition, negotiations are underway for additional medical missions to Chad. In addition to the above, medicine was also donated on an ad hoc or extraordinary basis, for example, when assisting the wounded when an ammunition warehouse exploded next to the N'Djamena Airport in June 2024 (Wright & Njie, 2024).

Optician training

Optician training is an essential part of the HBAid's projects in Chad. The aim of the optician training is to teach the latest techniques and technical innovations of eye examination, using modern, state-of-the-art technology to local professionals working in the field of optometry, and train them in the various types of spectacle lenses and spectacle making. During the training, HBAid cooperated, among others, with the domestic office of the OPC (l'Organisation pour la Prévention de la Cécité, in English: Organization for the Prevention of Blindness) and with the head of the PNLC, the National Program against Blindness organization.

In almost the entire African continent, but especially in equatorial countries and countries with a high number of hours of sunshine, cataracts are a common disease in the population over 50 years old, according to Mr. Benedek Raak, HBAid master optician (Foster, 1987). The training given to the local specialists addressed this issue. Another grave challenge is the unavailability of vision tests and glasses, especially for the rural population. One of the reasons for this is the small number of specialists and optical shops, as well as the lack of available modern tools and raw materials.

Among the general population, especially the elderly, women and children, as well as the population over 45 years old, near vision is largely unresolved, which can be remedied with reading glasses. HBAid is committed to continue this project, with the involvement of newly trained local opticians to screen additional refugee camps, schools and local people in need.

In addition to the training, HBAid also supported the basic health care system in Chad by renovating optometrist centers providing optometry equipment and a fleet of vision improvement equipment in the N'Djamena Central Hospital and the Moundou Provisional Hospital. An additional center will be renovated and equipped in Abeche. In order to ensure sustainability, an optical center will be established, where glasses will be made for the needy, free or at a reduced price, with the involvement of local specialists. The optometry equipment in this latest center will also be used for mobile

outreach. With these tools and professionals, the eye examination campaign will take place in refugee camps, schools, and other places where the need is identified.

The long-term vision is the construction and operation of a self-sustaining system that will be able to support the vision tests and the provision of glasses for those most in need.

Basic computer operator course (IT)

HBAid carried out two computer skills courses for a total of 40 people in the newly renovated classrooms in the Baba Moustapha Cultural Center. In addition to the students delegated from the refugee camps, young Chadian job seekers were among the participants who wanted to find a job but lacked the IT skills for a successful job application. Other participants worked in minor roles in some segments of the government apparatus, but their work required more IT knowledge. The course material was prepared with the involvement of a local accredited teacher, and the certificate awarded at the end of the courses is recognized as an official certification in the Chadian vocational training system (Minister Dr. Ndolembai Sadé Ndjesada, Ministry of National Education and Civic Promotion).

Sewing training for people with disabilities

The assistance, education and empowerment of people with disabilities (Coordination of Development Actors for Disabled People in Chad, led by Mr. Serge Mahamat) is a priority for HBAid and it has been heavily involved in these programs in Hungary and in over 20 countries in the world, another sewing course was implemented for persons with multiple disabilities in a classroom specially renovated to host them, thereby giving them the opportunity to integrate into the world of work and start their own small businesses. Additionally, all the participants underwent eye and vision examination, and over 80 percent were in need of glasses: these were provided to them.

Midwife training

Hopital Mere et Enfants / Hospital for Women and Children

Ministry of Health officials, rural local authority leaders, hospital workers all stressed the importance of and vast need for midwifery training. It has been emphasized throughout all the meetings that the provision of maternal and infant care services in rural Chad is consistently low.

The data on maternal health is devastating: there were 287,000 maternal deaths in the world in 2020 and globally one woman dies in every two minutes from a maternal cause. Sub-Saharan Africa accounted for around 70% (254,000) of estimated maternal deaths worldwide and has a 545 maternal deaths per 100,000 live births: in comparison, Europe and North America is at 13 maternal deaths per 100,000

live births. Chad was among the three countries with extremely high maternal mortality rates in 2017, the second worst in the world: South Sudan (1,223 maternal deaths per 100,000 live births), Chad (1,063 maternal deaths per 100,000 live births) and Nigeria (1,047 maternal deaths per 100,000 live births). A 15-yearold girl in Chad is estimated to have a 1 in 15 chance of dying of maternal causes during her lifetime – the highest lifetime risk in the world! (WHO et al, 2023). In Chad one in 16 women die due to complications while giving birth, which translates to a rate of 6.2 percent. Only 22 percent of women were assisted by qualified health personnel while giving birth in 2015 (Institut National de la Statistique, des Études Économiques et Démographiques (INSEED), Ministère de la Santé Publique (MSP) et ICF International, 2016). This figure is likely to be much more alarming in rural areas and particularly for nomadic farming communities, due to factors like geographical inaccessibility of modern medicine, political neglect and cultural preferences, exacerbating their vulnerabilities (Zinsstag, Ould Taleb & Craig, 2006).

The infant mortality rate refers to the number of infants who do not survive past the first year of life, expressed as a value per 1,000 births. The infant mortality rate in Chad declined in 2022 and saw its lowest number, with 64.1 deaths per 1,000 live births.

The hospital's professional developed high-impact interventions to reduce maternal and neonatal mortality. These are:

- Improve family planning coverage (including for young people)
- Training and deployment of skilled birth attendants
- Organize maternity units capable of handling obstetric and neonatal emergencies (EmONCs) (15% of pregnancies)
- Reduce financial barriers to services (EmONC, obstetric emergency referral)
- Development of community networks in RH
- Monitoring and management: maternal death surveillance and response, SONU monitoring.
- Of these the midwife training will focus on teaching and empowering the midwife to be capable of
 - Proper management of postpartum hemorrhage
 - Quality prenatal care and consultations
 - Indicating and using the obstetric suction cup
 - Providing SONUB care correctly

- Performing neonatal resuscitation

The first training will be held in N'Djamena as a Training of Trainers (TOT) session. 15 participants, gynecologists and midwives are expected to take part from Moundou, Abéché and N'Djamena and their surrounding areas. They will then work with local birth providers in three pools in their respective regions, most of whom received little if any training before, thus multiplying the effect of the training and the population reached (Dr. Lydie Danmadji, Head of Hopital Mere et Enfants). Its scheduled implementation will begin in 2025.

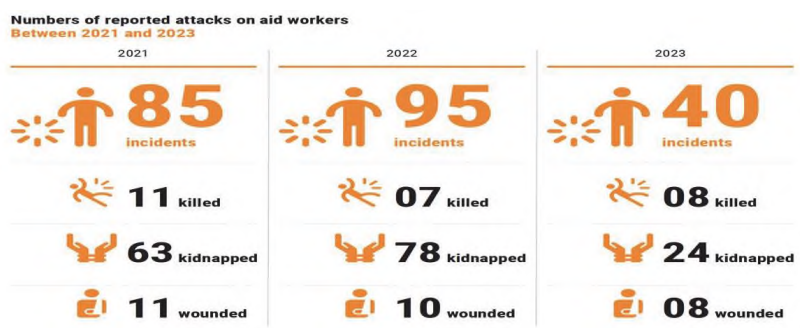
8. Humanitarian Assistance is not without danger

It is widely accepted that the implementation of humanitarian tasks in conflict zones is an increasingly dangerous task, and those providing assistance are so-called 'soft' targets. Those performing humanitarian tasks are unarmed and untrained in combat. Perhaps this, among many other factors, contributes to the increase in the number of atrocities against aid workers. In fact, the statistics show a slowly increasing trend, both in terms of volume and severity of incidents. Comparing the data of the Aid Worker Security Database (AWSDB, Humanitarian Outcomes: Aid Worker Security Database) from the 1990s, we can see 7-10 times increase in some data in the 2010s: The number of total security incidents rose from 35 in 1997 to 277 in 2019. The number of humanitarian workers who were a victim of crime increased from 75 to 483. 39 humanitarian workers were killed in 1997, however 125 were killed in 2019. 30 humanitarian workers were kidnapped in 1997, but 124 in 2019 (Horváth, Szilágyi & Besenyő, 2024, pp 27-30.).

From a security point of view, it is an alarming figure that 33% of international employees fell victim in the first three months of service, while 17% in the first 30 days (Land, 2016). What do these numbers communicate? Do they point to a lack of preparation, local knowledge, culture, local characteristics, or a deliberate violation of safety rules?

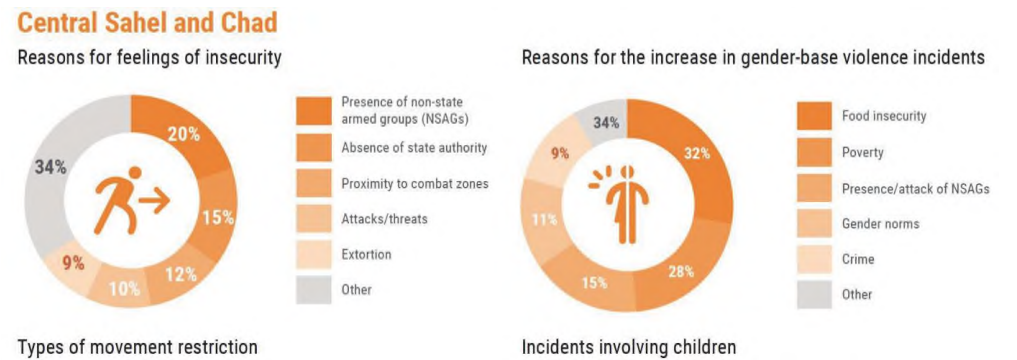
According to a 2014 UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs report (Land, 2016), international staff tend to overestimate security risks, which varies with the length of time spent in the field. In the case of local employees, the situation is reversed, as they generally underestimate dangers and risks, since they grew up and live in that environment, they are already 'accustomed' to facing critical situations on a daily basis. From the statistical data, it can be read that currently, kidnapping for financial gain has become one of the biggest sources of danger. When analyzing the risks and exposure, it can be concluded that the local employees are more exposed to this type of danger due to their greater number and familiarity, while the members of the international contingent - and therefore considered 'more valuable' - are in the crosshairs of the perpetrators in terms of the hoped-for or expected profit. In view of

the risk analysis of the given area, as well as the above, colleagues participating in the HBAid mission in Chad are either former peacekeepers with several years of humanitarian experience or seasoned humanitarian workers with extensive preparatory security training behind them in order to prepare them to carry out the tasks in Chad. Besides the essential local partnerships on many levels including, staff, drivers, translators and local authorities, personnel selection, training, contingency preparation, continuous analysis of evolving situations, and flexibility in project implementation are all key elements in keeping local and international staff safe.



Source: UN OCHA: 2024 Humanitarian Needs and Requirements Overview, Sahel. p. 19.

At the same time, it is of the utmost importance to assess the security of the beneficiaries, as well. The following figure describes reasons for feelings of insecurity and the incidents children in particular face.



Source: UN OCHA: 2024 Humanitarian Needs and Requirements Overview, Sahel. p. 19.

9. Difficulties / challenges

Transportation and movement

Driving in Chad is dangerous due to unsafe driving habits, poor road conditions, flooding, crime and other hazards. According to all health care providers we worked with, more people die of accidents on the roads than of malaria.

In view of the security situation, as well as close ministerial supervision, a detailed planning and authorization procedure precedes rural trips. For rural trips, the local authorities issue a so-called 'mission order' or 'movement order' upon request, which proves the 'service' nature of the trip. The mission order / movement order assists passing through checkpoints along the way, as well as informing the regional managers of our task.

Due to the varied topography of Chad and the weather characteristics of any given season, it is important to choose the right vehicle, prepare a route plan, ensure communications connectivity and, depending on the destination, the use of local security personnel. The latter is often offered or provided to us by the responsible regional official. This is especially true for the Lake Chad area, but also for the Northwest and East regions. Establishing a contingency plan and planning for sufficient water, food, various supplies and the communications network, is mandatory for projects in Chad (Mr. Sandor Horvath, HBAid's Chad project manager).

Communication

Chad lags massively behind in the development of telecommunications. Under the country code +235, there were a total of 12.11 million connections in 2023 (WorldData.info, n.d.). Among them were 12.10 million mobile phones, which corresponds to an average of 0.68 per person. Chad's telecommunications market is one of the least developed in the world but is experiencing a rapid growth and investment. The Government of Chad and foreign investors are focused on developing mobile cellular technology and fiberoptic infrastructure to improve web connectivity and digitize documents and services (International Trade Administration, 2020). Fixed telephone lines are rarely used and broadband internet is extremely limited. Most users rely on mobile internet connections. Huawei broke ground on a national data center in July 2020 and is in the process of the construction of a 4G network and the laying of fiberoptic cables. Mobile networks offer basic mobile data services using GPRS and EDGE technology as well as 3G/4G. The local GSM coverage is variable, as is the majority of the data traffic. Even satellite phone communication is unreliable.

Infections/diseases

Yellow fever is common in the region and proof of vaccination must be presented upon entry to the country. Malaria is not only widespread year-round, but the second most frequent killer in the population. Other insect-borne diseases including filariasis and African sleeping sickness are also present. HIV/AIDS is widespread. Waterborne, foodborne and infectious diseases include typhoid, cholera, tuberculosis, and rabies. Communicable diseases, such as diarrheal diseases, lower respiratory infections and malaria are the major contributors to death among the population of Chad (WHO, 2023).

Risks, dangerous places and situations

There is a continuing risk of instability in Chad, particularly in its border regions and during major political events. Chad is undergoing a political transition, and voting in Presidential elections concluded on May 6, 2024. Following the announcement of preliminary results, opposition groups called for protests. Legislative elections are also due to take place before the end of 2024. Chad is also extremely dangerous due to the risk of terrorism, kidnapping, civil unrest and violent crime. The terrorist groups, DAESH West African Province (ISWAP) and Boko Haram, remain active in the Lake Chad region (Venturi & Barana, 2021). In an attack in 2022, Boko Haram killed at least 30 Chadian soldiers near Baga Sola, Lac Province. A state of emergency is in place in the Lac and Kanem provinces where Chadian security forces were conducting military operations. In October 2024, Boko Haram killed at least 40 soldiers in an attack on a Chadian military base in Barkaram, Lake Chad region. Clashes between security forces and protestors have previously resulted in deaths. Violent conflict, including with armed rebels, continues to occur in parts of Chad. Kidnapping, armed robbery and carjacking have increased, including in daylight. Police checkpoints are common. For this reason, one is strongly advised to follow the advice of local authorities. To travel outside N'Djamena, one must get authorisation from the Ministry of the Interior, which is normally granted without difficulty in a few days time. (Mr. Sandor Horvath, HBAid's Chad project manager).

Weather

Chad stretches from the arid deserts of the Sahara in the north, through the climatic and vegetation zones (xeric shrublands and dry savanna, as well as flooded savannas and gallery forests) of the Sahel and Sudan, to the dry forests in the extreme south (known as Tchad utile during the colonial occupation due to its suitability for farming). In general, the country is affected by the West African Monsoon in summer, and the Harmattan Passat wind in the winter months. The South of the country has an almost tropical, seasonally wet climate with over 1,100 mm of precipitation, while the north has a desert climate with significant daily temperature fluctuations and very little rainfall (20 - 40 mm of precipitation annually).

Roads are in a poor condition and often impassable during the rainy season from July to October, especially in the South. Heavy rains can cause major flooding in several areas, particularly in the South and East. (Mr. Sandor Horvath, HBAid's Chad project manager, Climates to travel, n.d.)

10. Future plans

HBAid plans to continue the following projects to their completion:

10.1. Education and training: midwifery training, optometrist training, sewing course, IT training

10.2. Infrastructural developments: school renovation, hospital renovation, home for the elderly development (Abeche)

10.3. Emergency assistance: primarily medicines and medical assistance, but also response to unexpected events

10.4. Expand and deepen our partnership network with state bodies, ministries, local NGOs and international organisations (IOs), local communities.

Conclusion

The assessment of Hungarian Baptist Aid's humanitarian and development initiatives in Chad in 2023-2024 reveals several significant findings regarding the implementation of sustainable humanitarian assistance in complex crisis environments. The organization's dual-track approach, simultaneously addressing immediate humanitarian needs while pursuing long-term development goals, demonstrates both the challenges and opportunities inherent in contemporary humanitarian operations.

The research findings indicate that successful humanitarian interventions in Chad require careful attention to three critical dimensions. First, the integration of refugee and host community needs is essential for project sustainability, as evidenced by HBAid's vocational training programs and healthcare initiatives. This approach aligns with current humanitarian best practices and helps mitigate potential tensions between displaced populations and local communities. Second, the study underscores the importance of capacity building through knowledge transfer and infrastructure development. HBAid's implementation of specialized training programs - including humanitarian response manager, optical, midwifery, and IT training - represents a significant contribution to local capacity enhancement and empowerment. The success of these initiatives suggests that technical skills development, when properly aligned with local needs and market demands, can contribute meaningfully to community resilience. Third, the research highlights the critical role of security considerations in humanitarian operations. The documented increase in incidents involving aid workers, particularly during their initial deployment period, emphasizes the need for comprehensive security protocols and thorough pre-deployment preparation. This finding has significant implications for humanitarian organizations operating in the Sahel region.

Several key conclusions emerge from this analysis:

1. Sustainable humanitarian assistance in Chad requires a balanced approach that addresses both immediate crisis needs and long-term development goals.

2. The effectiveness of humanitarian interventions depends heavily on strong partnerships with local authorities, international organizations, and community stakeholders.

3. Security challenges in the region necessitate careful risk assessment and management strategies, particularly for international staff.

4. Infrastructure limitations, particularly in communications and transportation, significantly impact project implementation and require careful advance planning.

These findings contribute to the broader discourse on humanitarian assistance in complex emergencies and offer practical insights for organizations planning similar interventions. The research suggests that successful humanitarian operations in Chad require a nuanced understanding of local contexts, robust security protocols and sustainable project design.

Looking forward, this analysis indicates several areas requiring further attention from the humanitarian community. These include the need for improved coordination mechanisms among aid organizations, enhanced security protocols for field operations, and more systematic approaches to capacity building. Effective assistance is based on knowledge of distinct local characteristics and possible solutions to needs, respective to the community being served. Knowledge can be obtained in the most authentic way from the local partners and recipients (authorities, beneficiaries, other actors in need), as well as from national and international aid organizations working in the area performing similar tasks, thus building relationships with representatives of ministerial, local and international actors is of fundamental importance. Additionally, the study suggests that future humanitarian interventions in Chad should prioritize sustainable technology transfer and infrastructure development while maintaining sensitivity to local contexts and needs.

The experience of HBAid in Chad demonstrates that effective humanitarian assistance requires a careful balance between immediate aid and long-term development, underpinned by strong local partnerships and comprehensive security measures. These lessons have broader implications for humanitarian operations in similar complex emergency environments, particularly within the Sahel region. This conclusion acknowledges both the achievements and limitations of current humanitarian approaches in Chad, while pointing toward opportunities for improved effectiveness in future interventions. The findings underscore the continuing need for adaptive, context-sensitive humanitarian assistance that can effectively address both immediate crises and long-term development challenges in complex operational environments.

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PART III: REGIONAL SECURITY CHALLENGES

CHAPTER 21

Improvised Explosive Devices and The Threat They Pose in The Sahel and Beyond

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Abstract

The changing climate of the Sahel, economic and livelihood problems serve as a breeding ground for ongoing clashes and armed conflicts amongst the people living in the area. These conflicts are also responsible for the availability of a large number of explosive devices and war materials to the population and radical organisations operating in the area. Nowadays, bomb attacks are a constant occurrence, reducing the population's sense of security and giving even greater scope to extremist organisations. In addition to firearms, Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) pose a serious challenge to law enforcement agencies as a source of danger. The use of IEDs in the zone has increased significantly in recent years.

The unanimous view of climatologists for the future of the Sahel is that it will be an incredibly dry belt, with the prospect of a significant displacement of the local population. It can be concluded that the explosive devices currently being developed and used with criminal intent in this area, with the population and its knowledge base, could also be used in other areas, even in Europe. It is therefore necessary to examine what types of IEDs, their design and placement, and their possible applications are currently emerging in the countries of the Sahel belt and the immediate neighbourhood. Experience also shows that if you have a knowledge base, you can use it to 'make your mark' in other areas, countries and continents. In this context, it is necessary to identify the risk factors (explosive devices) that could in the future be a specific source of danger in the temporary or places final of residence of those leaving the Sahel.

It also raises interesting questions about the threats and challenges that international organisations face if they wish to continue their activities in the zone. The peacekeeping activities of international forces also require large numbers of advisers, trainers and other service personnel to be present in the countries of the zone to try to create the best possible living conditions. It is also in the interest of these personnel to carry out their daily tasks in the safest possible conditions. Awareness of the dangers and sources of danger they face has always been a high priority, but this becomes even more important and important in the context of IEDs.

The Sahel area

The Sahel, which means the edge of the desert, refers to the area between the desert and the savannah in the widest part of the African continent, stretching from the Atlantic to the Indian Ocean. The African countries that make up this region are politically disputed. The most widely accepted view is that Mauritania, Senegal, Gambia, Liberia, Guinea, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Nigeria, Cameroon, Chad, Sudan and Eritrea are part of the Sahel. As the effects of climate change are also bringing about significant changes in the Central African regions from year to year, the territorial extent of the Sahel may well change in a very short space of time. Thanks to colonialism, the exploitation of natural resources, inter-national fighting and the politics of great powers, this region has become one of, if not the poorest in the world. The security problems and humanitarian crises that characterise the region have been a long-standing and intractable problem.

The 19th century was a period of national liberation struggles, the 20th century of world wars. Will the 21st century go down in the history books as the century of terrorist bombings? Looking at the daily events of the past years and decade, this statement seems, unfortunately, alarmingly true (Lukács, 2012, p. 4).

The events of recent years unfortunately confirm this, with numerous military coups and radical salafi insurgencies in the countries of the region. In 2021 in Mali, Sudan and Guinea, in 2022 in Burkina Faso, and in 2023 in Niger, successful coups overthrew the ruling governments. In the case of Niger, a successful military coup aggravated an already desperate situation. The coups were invoked by the armed forces on the grounds that they were necessary for fear of radicals. All this provides a fertile ground for the growing terrorist threat, which is exacerbated by a number of political, economic and social factors.

Unfortunately, it cannot be said that these security challenges have only emerged or intensified in recent years, as conflicts with different motivations have been escalating in the Sahel. This trend dates back to the 1960s, when the countries of the region gained their independence. Since gaining independence, violent extremism has prevailed in almost all parts of the region, along with weak and

illegitimate governance that is unable to address the situation, while economic decline and climate change are further deepening the crisis (Osland & Erstad, 2020; Besenyő, 2006).

Crime, terrorism, violence and conflict have increased significantly in recent years and today pose major challenges for the countries of the Sahel region and the international community. It is clear that none of the countries in the region are politically stable, and food, water, education and weather-related problems are also seriously affecting the area. Given the current outlook, it is highly unlikely that any country in the region will be able to cope in the near future with the problems that have been present for decades.

The political, economic and security situation will only deteriorate further as a result of increasing conflict and extreme poverty. The spread of violent extremism is a consequence of persistently weak governance. These governments are characterized by corruption, democratic backsliding, lack of legitimacy and high levels of human rights abuses. As a result, hundreds of thousands, even millions of people are forced to flee their homes, exacerbating the escalating international migration situation. If we look at the world map, it is clear that the only option for a better life is to leave the continent and settle somewhere else, often in the west of Europe. It is no coincidence that one of the focal points of international politics taking place around events linked to the Sahel. The conflicts in the Sahel countries are interlinked at many points, making the region a complex regional crisis zone. Ethnic, religious and cultural boundaries coexist in the region, sometimes within a single state, creating a fundamentally conflicted environment. From failed and fragile states, to food and water shortages caused by severe environmental change, to extreme poverty, almost all the different dimensions of security in this region are fraught with significant problems. The growing population and steadily deteriorating living conditions make it of paramount importance to tackle these problems, with the international community required to play an increasing role (Bøås & Strazzari, 2020; Sour, 2015).

Terrorism and radicalism in the Sahel

Terrorist activity in the Sahel has spread rapidly since the turn of the millennium, for the reasons already described. Radicals, such as the various groups of Al-Qaeda in the I Maghreb (AQIM)⁷⁹, Boko Haram⁸⁰ and DAESH – Sahel Province (ISSP) (earlier

⁷⁹ Al Qaeda in the Maghreb – formed following the end of the Algerian civil war in 2002 through an alliance between the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC), an Algerian militant group, and al-Qaeda. It has since declared its intention to attack European and US targets.

⁸⁰ Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'Awati Wal J (Boko Haram) is an Islamist sectarian movement founded in 2002 in the northeast of Nigeria by Mohammed Yusuf, with the aim of eradicating corruption and injustice in Nigeria and introducing Sharia, the Islamic law. The group later vowed to avenge the deaths of Yusuf and other group members killed by security forces.

known as ISIS-Greater Sahara or ISGS⁸¹), have a significant impact on the region and its security (Cline, 2007).

Extremists and radicalized groups often use bomb attacks. In particular, JNIM⁸² is active in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, but there have also been a significant number of attacks by Ansaru⁸³, which is mainly operating on northern Nigeria, and Boko Haram (Schneider, 2024), which is active in the Lake Chad region, along the borders of Nigeria, Niger, Cameroon and Chad (Besenyő & Sinkó, 2021). Unfortunately, it must be said that the situation is not reassuring even if we look at smaller areas, as there are numerous radicalized armed groups active in any part of the region. In East Africa, al-Shabaab⁸⁴ is extremely active (it was responsible for almost 35% of the terrorist attacks in Africa in 2020), while in West Africa, attacks by DAESH of West Africa (ISWAP)⁸⁵, are terrorizing the region's population (Sinkó & Besenyő 2021; Besenyő et al., 2023).

The threat of attacks by extremist groups is growing and more and more are taking place in the region. A number of coups in recent years have forced the international community to withdraw its troops from the region. This has now led to the proliferation of radical militant attacks.

Considering the fact that governments around the world have devoted and continue to devote considerable resources to the fight against terrorism, it is important to analyse and aggregate the available data in order to better understand its various characteristics. One of the main objectives of the Global Terrorism Index⁸⁶ (GTI) is to

⁸¹ DAESH – Sahel Province (ISSP), earlier ISIS-Greater Sahara or ISGS – an operationally independent subgroup of DAESH, operating in the Liptako-Gourma region of the Sahel, which includes parts of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger. The community, which seeks to establish a Salafi- religiously motivated caliphate, is competing with other religiously motivated groups in the region for influence, fuelling radicalism and tensions in the region. The ISGS is known for its radical attacks on civilians, its manifestations of unbridled violence and its repeated attacks on both local and international security forces.

⁸² Jama'at Nusrat al I wal M – a Salafi religiously motivated organisation in West Africa and the Maghreb, formed by the merger of Ansar Dine, the Macina Liberation Front and al-Mourabitoun. It is also currently the Saharan branch of al-Qaeda in the I Maghreb (AQIM), which was dubbed the fastest growing terrorist group worldwide in 2022.

⁸³ Jama'atu Ansarul M Fi Biladis Sudan, Ansaru for short, was formed in 2012 through the activities of an armed group of Boko Haram. It initially carried out terrorist attacks in Nigeria but has expanded its activities to other areas. Ansaru shares ideological similarities and operational links with AQIM, including training and planning attacks. The organisation's leadership, structure and ideological objectives are not clear and are constantly changing in response to the political situation.

⁸⁴ Harakat al-Shabaab al-Mujahideen (Mujahideen Youth Movement), better known as al-Shabaab, is an extremist insurgent group formed in 2006 after the break-up of the Islamic Courts Union, which has set its sights on taking control of Somalia, which has descended into anarchy. Today, many believe that al-Shabaab insurgents successfully control the southern and central regions of Somalia, including large parts of the capital Mogadishu.

⁸⁵ DAESH West Africa Province – ISWAP (also known as IS-WA and ISIS-WA) is a radical militant group formed around 2015-2016. ISWAP operates primarily in the Chad Basin, but also carries out terrorist attacks against Nigeria, Cameroon, Chad, Niger and Türkiye. This group is a descendant of Boko Haram, with which it has a fierce rivalry and seeks to distinguish itself from the original organisation through more radical methods.

⁸⁶ GTI – a comprehensive study analysing the impact of terrorism in 163 countries covering 99.7 percent of the world's population. The GTI produces a composite score (made up of four indicators: incidents, deaths, injuries and hostages) to rank countries in order of the impact of terrorism.

examine these trends. Using data primarily from the Terrorism Tracker, but also taking into account other relevant sources, the Institute for Economics & Peace (IEP) produces the GTI report each year, which in recent years has included the following findings for the Sahel region:

2022 GTI Report:

- Sub-Saharan Africa accounts for 48% of global terrorism casualties.
- The Sahel is home to the world's fastest growing and deadliest terrorist groups (GTI, 2022).

2023 GTI Report:

- The Sahel is the region most affected, accounting for 43% of global terrorism victims, up 7% from a year earlier.
- In 2023, four of the ten countries most affected by terrorism were in West Africa (GTI, 2023).

2024 GTI Report:

- The epicentre of terrorism has shifted from the Middle East and sub-Saharan Africa to the Central Sahel region of Africa, where it now accounts for more than half of all terrorism-related deaths.
- Burkina Faso has suffered the worst impact of terrorism, with a 68% increase in deaths, despite a 17% decrease in attacks (GTI, 2024).

The fact that almost half of all terrorism-related deaths in the Sahel occurred in the Sahel region, according to the 2024 report, is depressing. Political turmoil, weak state institutions and religious and ethnic conflicts in the region contribute to the spread of terrorism. For terrorist groups, the Sahel provides an ideal environment in which to operate: weak government institutions, political crises and a lack of attention from the international community allow them to spread their ideologies widely through violence, propaganda and recruitment (Vision of Humanity). Radicalism is particularly fostered by the religious and ethnic tensions in the region, where different groups, particularly the Muslim majority and minority faiths, have been fighting for power for decades.

The Sahel has increasingly become a hotbed of terrorism and armed conflict as a consequence of decades of political instability, economic underdevelopment and social tensions. The proliferation of terrorist groups, in particular the rise of radicals and extremists, poses a serious threat not only to regional but also to global security. The use of improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and Explosive Remnants of War (ERWs)⁸⁷ plays a key role in terrorist activity in the Sahel, as these attacks allow

⁸⁷ Explosive Remnants of War are unexploded ordnance and abandoned explosive ordnance that are left by a party to an armed conflict following the cessation of warfare. Explosive ordnance is defined as conventional munitions containing explosives.

extremist groups to effectively destabilise the region, increase political and military tensions and undermine the stability of the region.

Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) and their use

One of the most common forms of terrorism in the Sahel is the use of improvised explosive devices (IEDs), which, in addition to being highly effective, are also cost-effective for terrorists (Ntuda Ebode, 2021). IEDs are essentially homemade explosive devices used by extremist groups against military and civilian targets, especially in places where the military and police presence is not strong.

The use of IEDs in the Sahel is beneficial to terrorist groups in several ways:

- **Cost-effective:** IEDs can be produced from readily available materials (scrap metal and other waste, various components, fertilisers, etc.), so they do not require expensive weapons, explosives or hard-to-obtain components.
- **Simple and flexible use:** IEDs can be used in a variety of ways, for example by placing explosive devices in different locations, by different modes of transport and by their highly versatile triggering mechanisms.
- **Difficult to detect:** As IEDs are often homemade and their users have very precise and detailed local information on locations, they are extremely difficult to detect, especially for government forces.
- **Psychological impact:** IEDs not only cause physical destruction, but also reinforce fear and insecurity, which destabilises local communities and undermines the legitimacy of governments.

Improvised explosive devices – or, as they are colloquially known, booby traps – are homemade materials made from military explosive devices, military or industrial explosives, or materials capable of detonation, or a combination of these. Improvised in their assembly, they are emplaced to destroy, incapacitate or confuse, which may contain lethal, harmful pyrotechnic or flammable chemical substances and CBRN components⁸⁸ (Daruka & Szalkai, 2024). These devices are usually made from artillery shells, tank mines (MILORD⁸⁹), but often unexploded ordnance, UXO⁹⁰, is used because it is easy to obtain, simple to transport and already has the fragmentation agent. Because such explosive devices contain large quantities of explosive material

⁸⁸ Chemical, Biological, Radiological and Nuclear components or accessories which may increase the harmful effects of explosive devices on health or contaminate designated areas.

⁸⁹ Military Ordnance – This includes bombs and warheads; guided and ballistic missiles; artillery, mortar, rocket and small arms ammunition; all mines, torpedoes and depth charges; pyrotechnics; clusters and dispensers; cartridge and propellant actuated devices; electro-explosive devices; clandestine and improvised explosive devices; and all similar or related items or components explosive in nature.

⁹⁰ Unexploded Ordnance – explosive ordnance that has been primed, fused, armed or otherwise prepared for use or used. It may have been fired, dropped, launched or projected yet remains unexploded either through malfunction or design or for any other reason.

(MILEX⁹¹), they have a high explosive yield and a high fragmentation effect, but relatively low armour piercing capability.

The use of IEDs is significantly influenced by the constantly changing environmental conditions and the availability of the components of the IED to be used. For the Sahel region, the ongoing conflicts and the war materials used in them (weapons, ammunition, explosive devices, etc.) clearly contribute to and provide a supply for the development of IEDs and booby traps. Designers and constructors of devices use the most readily available and obtainable materials (e.g. ERW), but only the creativity of the device designer and the quantity and technological standard of the materials and components available (or obtainable) limit the complexity and sophistication of the device (Kovács & Daruka, 2013). These components may be almost the only help in detecting the devices and thus in tracking down terrorist cells. It is also important to note that, although counter-terrorism processes are based on the same principles as in Europe, for example, they are very difficult to implement in the light of local specificities.

Explosive devices can range in size from the size of a matchbox to the size of a truck, depending on the target to be destroyed or damaged and the effect to be achieved. A single 'pipe bomb'⁹² may be sufficient to eliminate a single individual, while a more destructive attack on a building or a major facility may require several tonnes of explosive charges.

In terms of deployment, a distinction is made between fixed and mobile improvised explosive devices. In the case of a fixed explosive device, which are mostly monitored devices, detonation is triggered by the bomber when the moving target (e.g. a military convoy vehicle) has approached the device at an optimal distance. In mobile devices, the explosive device is delivered in some way to a static target (e.g. a building) or close to the target.

The design of the charge can be either directional, such as EFP⁹³ (Lukács, 2004), or fragmentation, such as IRAM⁹⁴.

⁹¹ Military Explosive – a military substance or mixture of substances which, under external influences, is capable of rapidly releasing energy in the form of gases and heat.

⁹² A pipe bomb is an IED that uses a tightly sealed section of pipe filled with an explosive material. The containment provided by the pipe means that simple low explosives can be used to produce a relatively large explosion due to the containment causing increased pressure. The fragmentation of the pipe itself creates potentially lethal shrapnel.

⁹³ Explosively Formed Projectiles – An explosively formed penetrator (EFP), also known as an explosively formed projectile, a self-forging warhead, or a self-forging fragment, is a special type of shaped charge designed to penetrate armour effectively, from a much greater standoff range than standard shaped charges, which are more limited by standoff distance. As the name suggests, the effect of the explosive charge is to deform a metal plate into a slug or rod shape and accelerate it toward a target.

⁹⁴ Improvised Rocket Assisted Mortar – an explosive device delivered by a homemade rocket. The device, which was widely used in the 2007 Iraq war, consisted of explosives and shrapnel placed in an empty gas cylinder, usually fired from the back of a truck. It can weigh up to 50-60 kilograms.

IEDs can vary in shape and form but, apart from a few special designs, all structures have as an essential part the explosive charge, the detonator that initiates the charge and the trigger mechanism that triggers the detonator. In addition to the basic components, the explosive device may also include a power source, a timing device or booster shrouds, shrapnel or some form of concealment casing. Most IEDs contain a safety device designed to protect the perpetrator against accidental activation of the device during assembly, transport and deployment.

IEDs used in the Sahel can take many forms:

- **Roadside Explosive Devices:** one of the most commonly used IEDs, used mainly against military and peacekeeping forces. Such IEDs are often hidden in roadside barriers, ditches and culverts. A common feature is that they are detonated remotely when a vehicle or convoy passes the device. In such attacks, the devices are observed, as in Iraq and Afghanistan, so that the bomber is positioned somewhere close to the target area, with a good view of it.
- **Suicide bombings:** the use of suicide bombings as a method of attack has become increasingly common in the Sahel. Despite the fact that successful attacks can be carried out with explosive devices strapped to belts, vests or simply strapped to their bodies, the most common is the use of devices targeted by suicide car bombers.
- **Attacks on peacekeeping forces and aid supplies:** IEDs are used to target peacekeeping forces, international aid organisations and local government forces. These attacks are aimed at the presence and discrediting of the international community and local governments. It is also not uncommon for disguises such as police or ambulances to be hijacked and loaded with explosives, taking advantage of their easy access to any location, to drive into the targeted area and detonate the explosive device, which is capable of causing significant destruction.
- **The use of IEDs has intensified throughout the Sahel.** Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger and areas adjacent to Sudan are particularly hard hit, with the largest number of military clashes and attacks resulting in the highest number of civilian casualties. In addition to the use of IEDs, terrorist groups also use other means, such as attacks to intimidate local communities, kidnappings and the destruction of schools and health facilities.

Our analysis of terrorist attacks has led us to conclude that over the past decade, IEDs have become the most popular and therefore the most effective weapon of choice for terrorist groups in West Africa. The availability of limited resources across much of the African continent has had an impact on the development of IEDs. As a result, the devices are mostly of simple design, inexpensive and assembled from

readily available components. Despite the fact that we are talking about very simple devices, IEDs have a fundamental impact on the freedom of movement of governments and security forces. The variety of their design affects the population's defence capabilities and defence mechanisms. Given all this, IEDs are an effective strategic weapon for regional terrorist groups. Consequently, the number of IED attacks – in some areas – is steadily increasing, leaving innocent men, women and children victims, wounded, disabled and traumatized.

The number of reported IED attacks has tripled in the last five years. Terrorist groups are upgrading their methods and tactics to adapt to the military response against them and to target vulnerable, remote areas. Terrorist groups target defence and security forces, border posts, critical infrastructure and civilians to maximize the impact of their attacks on through death, and general terror in society (Karr, 2024). The wide range of materials that can be used in the manufacture of explosive devices clearly highlights the comprehensive nature of the problem and the need for a comprehensive approach. Preventing the use of IEDs by identifying and dismantling supply chains and combating their use by conducting effective investigations that lead to the prosecution of perpetrators of IED attacks are key elements of an effective counter-terrorism response.

Long-term effects of the use of IEDs

The long-term effects of the use of IEDs can be manifold and can lead to major changes in many areas of society, the economy, politics and public security. These types of attacks not only cause immediate tragedy for the victims, but also have long-term psychological, economic and social consequences. The most important effects include:

- Psychological and social effects: permanent injuries, disfigurements, loss of limbs, caused by explosive devices, result in trauma and psychological damage that can lead to a disconnection at the community level and at the same time cause generational trauma. The use of IEDs has not only physical effects but also direct psychological and social consequences. Regular bombings increase fear among civilians and undermine perceptions of the effectiveness of governments. They also contribute to political and social fragmentation and reinforce mistrust and polarization in local communities.

- Political effects: attacks reduce government responses and freedoms, and make the fight against terrorism more valuable and a fundamental expectation of society, thus a key instrument of political instability and radicalization.

- Economic impacts: Long-term impacts include a decline in economic activity, damage to infrastructure and an increase in humanitarian crises. Local communities are often unable to resist terrorist groups, as IEDs can be used to reach the civilian population. These types of attacks not only claim the lives of direct victims,

but also contribute to the deterioration of the overall security environment in the region. From another point of view, combating attacks can come at a huge cost, not to mention the huge strain on the local economy to deal with the aftermath of successful attacks (reconstruction and rehabilitation). As a result, the countries of the region are facing another crisis - the development they covet remains a pipe dream, as no domestic, let alone foreign, investor will risk their money or the lives of their professionals in a country that faces constant danger. This leaves poverty and even misery, which in turn is a breeding ground for the outbreak of new armed conflicts: a vicious circle.

- Public safety and legal implications: public safety and legal implications of explosive terrorism are serious and wide-ranging. These types of attacks have not only put victims at risk, but have also had a serious impact on the security of society and on legal and law enforcement responses. In terms of public safety implications, explosive terrorism is particularly dangerous because of the massive destruction that explosive devices can cause and the rapid increase in casualties. Consequently, fear and panic in society increases. One of the objectives of explosive attacks can be to deliberately create panic amongst the population, which can have a long-term impact on public confidence, people's sense of security and societal relations. This often foreshadows the activation of stronger law enforcement tools and an increasingly strict application of the law. This increased social control can, in turn, generate new discontent and tensions, which could also destabilize the incumbent power.

- International impact: IED attacks can have particularly serious consequences, as they are not only aimed at causing large numbers of victims, but also at increasing social and political tensions. Political effects include a loss of international confidence, the need for a necessary security policy response and political polarization. If these impacts are to be addressed, global cooperation, humanitarian aid and appropriate action on refugee crises will be required. In the case of the countries of the Sahel, international response and cooperation can form the basis for assistance, including international legal and diplomatic responses, special operations and intelligence, and of course sanctions and embargoes (Bala & Tar, 2021). But these are often perhaps the biggest challenge in the case of Africa.

The long-term effects of IEDs and terrorism are far-reaching and profound. In addition to the immediate victims, they also affect society as a whole, increasing psychological trauma, economic damage, political instability and social polarisation. The response to terrorism and the measures needed to prevent it often only generate additional challenges and problems, and only a comprehensive and long-term strategy, with the help of other neighbouring countries, can make it more difficult for groups with radical views to develop and acquire the necessary means to do so.

Spatial distribution of IED attacks in the Sahel

In order to draw a parallel between the types of devices and their areas of application, it is necessary to be able to trace the components of the devices (main charge, switch, triggering mechanism, etc.). The problem focuses on the fact that these components are often so-called dual-use materials, i.e. they have a normal social use but are also used to build IEDs. It is of paramount importance, if possible, to track the movement of these materials in order to obtain information on the proliferation of devices in any area of the Sahel.

In the Sahel, as well as in West Africa, the spread and use of IEDs has been observed to be expanding southwards and eastwards since 2017. IED attacks were initially carried out successfully in northern Mali, but have become increasingly common in Burkina Faso, Niger and now Côte d'Ivoire over the past few years. The designs and components that are common across West Africa and are now used as far afield as the Central African Republic (Hainard & Lochhead, 2021).

Research by Lebrun & Morland (2023) has shown that the use of improvised explosive devices in West Africa was particularly high between 2014 and 2022. In this period, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Mali, Niger, and Nigeria experienced a large increase in the volume of attacks, while Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, and Togo, although significantly less, were involved in IED attacks. As the volume of attacks during this period exceeded 2,200, it is not possible to clearly isolate the type of explosive device used by terrorists (UNMAS, 2018. UN IEDD Standards). When analyzing the attacks, it was found that the following explosive devices appeared in the majority:

- COIED⁹⁵ – Command-operated improvised explosive device;
- CWIED⁹⁶ – Command wire improvised explosive device;
- PBIED⁹⁷ – Person-borne improvised explosive device;
- PIED⁹⁸ – Projected improvised explosive device;
- RAVOIED⁹⁹ – Radio-armed, victim-operated improvised explosive

device;

⁹⁵ A type of switch in the IEDs that is activated by the attacker to control the moment of initiation. This category could include switches such as command wire, radio-controlled switches, etc.

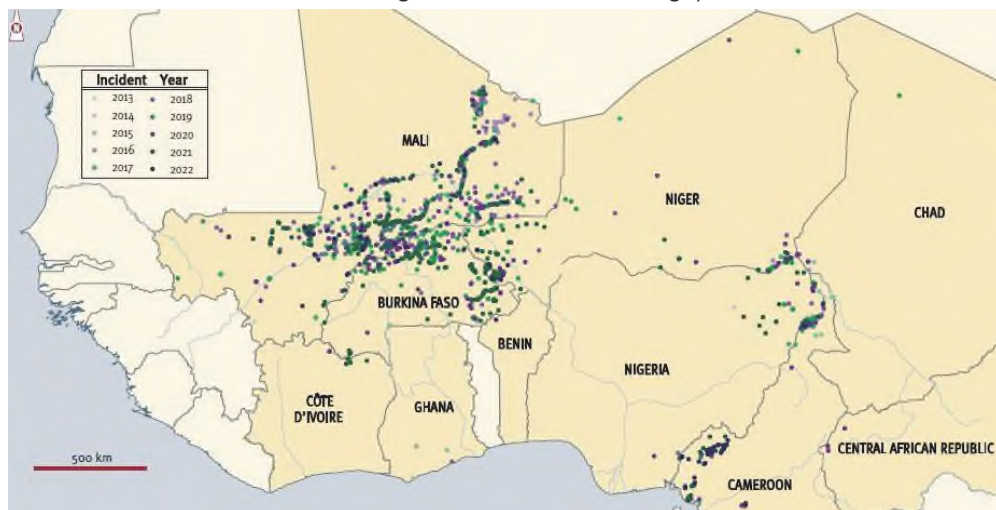
⁹⁶ CWIEDs employ a switch in which the firing location, initiator, and explosives are joined together by a length of wire, forming a simple circuit. They may contain several power sources close to both the firing point and the explosives 'to overcome the resistance in the length of the wire' (United Nations Mine Action Service – UNMAS, n.d., p. 52).

⁹⁷ PBIEDs are 'worn, carried, or housed by a person, either willingly or unwillingly' (UNMAS, n.d., p. 59). PBIEDs involving persons willingly acting as PBIEDs are considered suicide PBIEDs (SPBIEDs) and are called 'suicide bombers. PBIEDs involving persons who are unwilling bombers are called proxy bombers. Owing to the lack of clarity in many PBIED cases if an attack involved a suicide or proxy bomber, this Report generally does not distinguish between these two types of bombers.

⁹⁸ These IEDs involve using an improvised switch or launching platform to launch an improvised or conventionally manufactured rocket, mortar, or artillery projectile towards a target.

⁹⁹ RAVOIEDs are armed using the same receivers and transmitters found in RCIEDs. They can selectively target an individual or group by the attacker observing the approach of the target to the IED, at which point the IED is

- RCIED¹⁰⁰ – Radio-controlled improvised explosive device;
- SPBIED – Suicide person-borne improvised explosive device;
- VBIED¹⁰¹ – Vehicle-borne improvised explosive device;
- VOIED¹⁰² – Victim-operated improvised explosive device (UNMAS, 2018. Guidelines: IED Threat Mitigation in Mission Settings).



Map 1 Distribution of IED incidents¹⁰³

A common feature of IED attacks is that IED designs have remained cheap and broadly unchanged in terms of sophistication in the West African region, making the detection of explosive devices and the tracing of their components extremely difficult, often seemingly impossible.

In the IED incidents, it was observed that they contained explosives or precursors (GICHD, 2021) that were specifically manufactured for commercial extraction, or mostly intended for use in the construction sector. Bulk explosives produced for mining purposes, such as ammonium nitrate (AN), also appeared in the

armed remotely by the radio-controlled switch. Then, the IED is initiated by the victim carrying out some action to complete the firing circuit. These variants of VOIEDs represent the pinnacle of IED technical and tactical sophistication observed in the research area.

¹⁰⁰ These devices employ a switch initiated electronically by wireless means consisting of a transmitter and a receiver to target a specific victim (UNMAS, n.d., p. 60).

¹⁰¹ This type of IED is ‘delivered by or concealed in a ground-based vehicle’ (UNMAS, n.d., p. 64). VBIEDs qualify as suicide VBIEDs (SVBIEDs) if they are ‘initiated by the attacker at a time of their choosing’ and ‘they intentionally kill themselves as part of the attack, or possibly to deny capture’ (p. 62).

¹⁰² VOIEDs use a switch that is ‘activated by the actions of an unsuspecting individual’ and ‘rely on the intended target to carry out some form of action that will cause it to function’ (UNMAS, n.d., p. 65). VOIEDs do not discriminate or target specific victims, unlike command IEDs. Notably, the function and indiscriminate nature of VOIEDs place them within the scope of the Anti-personnel Mine Ban Convention – APMBC, where they are often referred to as ‘landmines of improvised nature’ (UN, 2019).²⁴

¹⁰³ Note: The data presented in this map should not be considered exhaustive. Source: Based on the Small Arms Survey (2022) edited by the authors.

terrorist agenda. These explosives were mainly sourced from Ghana and Nigeria, but other commercially available explosives, including precursors and other accessories such as electrical detonators, were diverted from the legal market to the illicit market (UNMAS, 2018. IED Lexicon).

The finished explosive devices (mines, grenades and artillery shells) originated from Chad, Libya and possibly Sudan, but it is not clear by which routes these explosive devices were imported into these countries (King Colin, 2011).

As a result of the 'Arab Spring' fighting in 2011, huge quantities of combat equipment and ammunition were uncontrolledly removed from the warehouses of the former armed forces.

In some countries of the Sahel region, good practices exist to regulate trade in these parts and components and to prevent diversion. For example, all countries in the region have some laws regulating trade in dual-use IED components. However, these laws are often outdated or do not follow the harmonization of other legislation (ACLED, 2024). There is a need for harmonization of legislative measures and other regulations between Sahel countries, as often one country does not consider certain chemical components, such as ammonium nitrate, as explosives, but another country does. As a result, in countries where the goods are considered explosive, security forces escort these goods from the point of entry to the destination.

Conclusions

As can be seen from the above, the Sahel region is a group of countries with extremely unfavorable conditions. Their economic potential is extremely low, their existing potential is steadily declining and their own resources are insufficient to initiate a development process. Desertification and the demographic explosion are further hampering the prospects for catching up, and the area is likely to continue to become even poorer and to experience increased conflict between social groups. Without improvements in health, education and infrastructure, the fight against corruption and the achieving of some kind of political stability, economic development is unthinkable. Social disparities and stratification will widen, with implications for the local and regional terrorist presence. For the international monopolies and investors, a economic 'catch-up' of the Sahel countries is of no direct benefit, and the international organizations do not have the means to do so, so that further significant disintegration of the countries can be expected. North-South divisions, whether cultural or religious, will become even more acute, and this will have an impact on the activities of terrorist organizations.

The number of bombings may decrease, but as we are seeing now, the number of victims is constantly increasing, so terrorists are choosing even more brutal means to achieve their goals. Tracing the components of explosive devices and strict but

consistent regulation of their marketing may reduce the use of certain types of IEDs to some extent, but it will not solve the problem itself. The real solution would be to prevent the entry of materials and finished military products (explosive devices) into the country, so that there would be a greater chance of a significant reduction in attacks due to shortages of materials once stocks are depleted.

Another possibility is that the social order should be regulated in such a way that terrorist organizations and their supporters are forced to curb their activities. This is not a simple and immediately achievable task. So, for the time being, all that can be done is to train the public and the staff of your organizations involved in the discharge of IEDs in how to behave and what procedures to follow in dangerous environments.

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Findings, Conclusions, Lessons Learned, and Recommendations for NATO

Prof. Dr. János Besenyő

In this chapter, I will summarize the chapters in this volume, but first I will briefly assess NATO's activities in Africa and the countries of the Sahel region.

Since its inception, NATO has been constantly confronted with changing security circumstances and has sought to adapt to them. This has been the case with the end of the Cold War, the end of the bipolar world system, the outbreak of the Balkan conflict, later Afghanistan and now the conflict between Russia and Ukraine. Although the organisation was not originally intended to play a major international role, it quickly 'outgrew' its original framework and began to play an increasingly active role on the world stage. It became involved not only in Europe but also in its immediate surroundings (Middle East, North Africa) and even further afield (Asia). Today, the defence organisation has interests and cooperation on almost every continent. This volume looks at the relationship between NATO and the Sahel, but it can only be fully understood in the light of the relationship between NATO and the African Union (AU), so I will briefly cover area too.

NATO has had a permanent presence on the African continent since 2005, where it has developed a strategic partnership, notably with the AU. The first joint cooperation started in 2005, when NATO, at the request of the AU, provided assistance to the AU peacekeeping operation (African Union Mission in Sudan/AMIS) to stop the conflict in Darfur, providing financial, logistical and air support for the deployment and withdrawal of African troops to the area of operations. It also provided advisers and experts to the peace operation (Besenyő, 2021, pp. 119-123; Segell, 2008, pp. 10-18). It has provided ongoing operational support, training support and structural support to AU member states at the request of the AU. It also provided substantial support (material, logistical, strategic airlift and sealift support, planning, etc.) for the launch and subsequent operations of the AU mission in Somalia (later the African Union Transition Mission to Somalia/ATMIS and now the African Union Support Mission in Somalia, AUSSOM) after Operation Darfur (Giegerich, 2013, p. 313; Marsili, 2020, p. 199). The cooperation has not been limited to individual missions but has become permanent and institutionalised. Thus, officers from African countries received training at NATO institutions (Centre of Excellence Defence Against Terrorism in Ankara, Türkiye, NATO School in Oberammergau, Germany, the NATO Defense College in

Rome, Italy), participates in joint exercises, and, if necessary, NATO even provides tailor-made training in African countries through NATO's Mobile Education and Training Teams (NATO 2023). NATO also played a role in the design, deployment and operation of the African Stand-by Force (Pasquali, 2018, p. 90). Cooperation has been steadily strengthening over the years, to the extent that NATO has established its own liaison office at the AU headquarters in Addis Ababa, where its staff are in daily contact with African partners, other international organisations and the countries that work with them. Following the Warsaw Summit in 2016, NATO has further strengthened its cooperation with the AU. This was also the time when NATO's Framework for the South was established, which aims to facilitate NATO's regional engagement and activities in Africa, including through the deployment of military units (NATO Response Force deployment) (Brandsma, 2019). In 2017, the Strategic Direction-South Hub (NSD-S Hub) was established and is located in the NATO Joint Force Command (Naples) which monitors events on the African continent. In November 2019, NATO and the AU signed an agreement to strengthen cooperation, followed by new agreements in March 2020. In 2021, NATO again expanded the military cooperation offered to the AU and, in 2022, AU Commissioner for Political Affairs, Peace and Security, Ambassador Bankole Adeoye, visited NATO headquarters (NATO 2023).

NATO and the Sahel

Since the early 2000s, NATO and its member states (especially the southern European countries) have been facing increasing security challenges from North Africa (especially Libya) and the countries of the Sahel (especially the G5 Sahel countries, Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger). This has taken the form of various economic, governmental, security and counter-terrorism cooperations (Pan-Sahel initiative, G5S Joint Force's project, etc), and then through peace operations such as MINUSMA, EUCAP Sahel Niger, EUCAP Sahel Mali, EUTM Mali, EUMPM Niger, Operation Serval and Operation Barkhane (D'Amato & Baldaro, 2024). Through these, NATO and some of its member countries have also sought to play a role, mainly in the defence of the southern borders of the European continent (Herráez, 2025, pp. 4-5). Also important for NATO are economic and other forms of cooperation with the region, and the fact that the region's population is growing at a very rapid pace and, with a significant proportion unable to continue to inhabit in their homelands, migration to Europe is increasing. The organisation has, therefore, been working for years to develop mutually beneficial cooperation with the Sahel countries.

The NATO is primarily interested in security cooperation and crisis management to stabilise the countries of the region. To this end, it has launched Defence and Security Capacity Building (DCB) programmes, through which it has cooperated with some of the Sahel countries (Niger, Mali) and provided limited training for the leadership of the armed forces and law enforcement agencies. Through

NATO's Mediterranean Dialogue Partnership programme, support has been provided to equip, train and deploy the armies of the countries of the region in the fight against terrorism. The organisation has developed a particularly good relationship with Mauritania, which joined NATO's Mediterranean Dialogue partnership programme in 1995, but actual cooperation only started in 2013 through NATO's Defence Education Enhancement Programme. For example, NATO has not only been involved in the training of the Mauritanian army: NATO Allied Special Operations Forces Command (SOFCOM) has also played a significant role in equipping and training Mauritania's Special Forces, but has also been actively involved in the establishment of four crisis management centres in the country. In January 2021, the President of Mauritania visited NATO headquarters, where he met the Secretary General of NATO, Jens Stoltenberg. In June 2022, Mauritania was invited to the Madrid Summit as a 'non-NATO partner' and was awarded the Defence Security Capacity Building Package, which will allow the Mauritanian army to be further strengthened and modernised (Ramani, 2023).

However, the Sahel countries have not only cooperated with NATO itself as a defence/military organisation, but also with several NATO member states through bilateral relations. A good example of this is Italy, which, in cooperation with Niger, launched a separate training mission (Operation MISIN) for local Security Forces compliant with Italian doctrine of capacity building in crisis areas (Spagnolo, 2019, pp. 209-230).

The arrival of new allies (principally the Wagner Group) to replace the former Western allies has confounded the expectations of the population, as they are incapable of taking effective action against terrorist organisations (Herráez, 2025, pp. 5-6). Indeed, they are often used by military governments as a tool against groups critical of them. Public security is steadily deteriorating, security risks are increasing, corruption is on the rise, economic performance is declining, poverty is rising and migration towards Europe is increasing in their areas of influence. Unfortunately, terrorist groups have already established footholds in neighbouring countries (Ghana, Guinea, Togo, Benin, Ivory Coast), putting the stability of the region at risk.

Although many have suggested that NATO could play a role in stabilising the region, this carries considerable risk, especially in light of the significant influence that Russia and China have gained in recent years in the Sahelian countries, with which the organisation would not engage in open conflict. A number of new players have also emerged in the region, including Iran, which would like to obtain uranium from Niger in exchange for drones and weapons for the junta. Iran is also seeking to develop better cooperation not only with Niger, but also with Mali and Burkina Faso (Vial & Bouvier 2025). This could also complicate NATO's possible involvement in the region. Or, as an external intervener, it could provoke local resentment, which could have

negative consequences. If NATO were to act inappropriately, as some say it did in Libya (Besenyő, 2013), it could potentially increase the rate of migration from the region to Europe, which, in addition to posing a security risk, could weaken cohesion within the organisation, especially if the organisation does not provide adequate support and guarantees to its member countries that are affected by migration. Therefore, NATO should aim to strengthen its influence in the Sahel countries primarily through humanitarian, social and economic support. It is also important to continue to cooperate with regional organisations (ECOWAS, Accra Initiative) and individual countries that are open to it in the fields of security, military and counter-terrorism. This will prevent further destabilisation in the region (D'Amato & Baldaro, 2024). However, it is essential that the organisation clarifies its intentions and strategy for the region, defines priorities and the framework through which member states can engage in the region and communicates them appropriately. It is also important to implement possible structural and other changes so that any NATO involvement can be implemented quickly and smoothly (setting up a research institute for the region, etc.).

Our volume, which has been compiled to provide the appropriate background information on the Sahel countries, can help with the possible NATO involvement. The volume is divided into three main parts. The first part (regional overview) contains a chapter on the geography and characteristics of the Sahel, in which the author makes it clear that:

“The Sahel region, which forms a diverse environmental unit, presents significant challenges both for the states of the region and for external power actors seeking to assert their geopolitical interests in the area” (Péter Miletics, *Geography of the Sahel*).

This could be the motto of the whole book, which illustrates the challenges NATO may face. In the second chapter, András Türke, head of the Europa Varietas Institute, Switzerland, who has considerable knowledge of French activities in the region and in Africa, tracks past, lesser known and current events in the states of the region (András Türke, *History of the Sahel*). In the third chapter, the reader will learn about the economic life of the countries of the region, their characteristics and their impact on various processes (political, security, etc.). A special section deals with the impact of climate change, political instability, the role of external actors, and the author even offers a forecast of the likely effects on the regional economy and formulates strategies and proposals for stabilising it (Animesh Roul, *Economy of the Sahel: Challenges, Opportunities, and Geopolitical Tensions*).

The second part (Global and national relationships with the region) contains eight chapters. In the first chapter, the authors examine a specific segment of the EU's relations with the Sahel countries, namely the fight against terrorism. This is also a very important issue for NATO, as a strategic partner of the EU, which cannot be

ignored in its relations with the Sahel countries (Mariann Táncos; Katalin Horváth, The European Union's counter terrorism activity in the Sahel).), Tamás Csiki Varga, Senior Researcher and Lecturer at the John Lukacs Institute for Politics and Strategy of the Ludovika University of Public Service (Budapest, Hungary), examines NATO's engagement and cooperation with the Sahel states (especially Mauritania) so far, and the possible direction of further cooperation. However, this will not be easy, as a recent evaluation from NATO's Southern Hub even concluded that:

“the gap between Western nations and Sahel countries in terms of cooperation has widened due to rapidly changing security dynamics, divergent priorities, and inconsistent approaches”. (NSD-S Hub & UFV, 2024, 14)

The third chapter presents the role and activities of the African Union in the Sahel. It describes and reviews its strategy for the region and highlights how it has cooperated with regional organisations to address key security challenges. It describes the achievements and shortcomings of the AU's efforts in the Sahel and makes recommendations aimed at improving the organisation's capacity to address the region's deteriorating security situation (Ntaka Buyisile Sinqobile: The African Union and the Sahel Region). The fourth chapter (Tibor Pintér: United States and the Sahel) focuses on the military presence of the United States in the Sahel region and its results and effectiveness. The author also discusses US aid and economic policies, in line with geostrategic interests and the US ambition to increase its diplomatic, economic and military influence in Africa. In the fifth chapter, the authors examine the very pragmatic relationship between China and the Sahel countries, based mainly on economic and diplomatic cooperation, especially in the light of the efforts of China to replace France and other Western countries in the region (alongside Russia, India and Türkiye) (Zoltán Vörös; Jean-Pierre Cabestan: China and the Sahel). In the sixth chapter (János Besenyő; Zsolt Szabó: Russia and the Sahel), the two authors show how Russia has gained increasing influence in the Sahel over the last 10 years, mainly through diplomatic, military and security, and to a lesser extent, economic instruments. This can be seen in particular in the increasing visibility of the activities of the Russian PMCs (Wagner Group, Africa Corps), especially in Burkina Faso, Niger and Mali, countries where the army has seized power by coup (Romaniuk & Besenyő, 2023). In the next chapter (Elem Eyryce-Tepeciklioğlu; Ali Onur Tepeciklioğlu: Türkiye's Growing Footprint in the Sahel), we will trace Türkiye's rise in the region. We can see how the Turkish leadership has begun to increase its diplomatic, economic, humanitarian and military/security engagement in the region, which is a clear indication that not only Africa, but also the Sahel region within it, has become a significant focus of Turkish foreign policy. The authors in this chapter analyse the factors that underline Türkiye's engagement in the region through three general categories: business ties, soft power tools and defence and security engagements. In the eighth and final chapter (Nail

Elhan: Iran in the Sahel: Strategic calculations and geopolitical maneuvers in the shadows), the author describes Iran and its activities as a less known “player” in the region. The Shi’ite power has emerged in the region in the past year, seeking to build better diplomatic, political, economic and military ties to counter the influence of Western powers, Saudi Arabia and the Sunni Gulf states. Iran seeks to establish bilateral and multilateral relations with the Sahel countries and expand its influence in the region. It has done so spectacularly in Nigeria, Burkina Faso and Eritrea. However, this has raised concerns in several countries with influence or aspiring to influence in the region, not least because the emergence of Iran and its rivalry with these powers has turned the region into a battlefield for influence, complicating local security dynamics and contributing to instability in the region.

The third part of the book (Regional security challenges) contains a further ten thematic studies/chapters. In the first chapter (Dávid Vogel: Sahel and security: situational overview and challenges ahead), the author analyses the security situation in the region, not only as a researcher but also as a person who has served as a soldier and peacekeeper in the Central African Republic and later as an aid worker in Chad. In his chapter he uses Barry Buzan’s sectoral concept of security, reviewing the situation through the political, economic, societal, environmental and military aspects. Accordingly, he analyses and evaluates various databases on the countries of the region and draws conclusions. In the second chapter, the authors examine military coups and their consequences in specific Sahel countries (Mali, Niger, Sudan, and Burkina Faso) and the relationship and interaction between state fragility and coups (Scott N. Romaniuk; László Csicsmann: Military coups and state fragility in the Sahel). The authors use data from the Fund for Peace’s Fragile States Index and the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED) Conflict Index. Chapter three introduces the reader to water security and its impacts in the Sahel and the opportunities for improving water security (Viktor Glied; Attila Pánovics: Sahel and Water Security). Chapter four is written by two experts who have been involved in several food security-related programmes in the region and have been conducting research on food security for many years. The chapter on food security in the region has managed to find the right balance between theoretical and practical issues. At the end of the chapter, they propose the initial steps needed to define a strategy for food security in the Sahel (Szilvia Veress Juhászné; Péter Gergő Juhász: Food security in the Sahel). The following chapter, written by Pieter Van Ostaeyen, traces the events that have led to the strengthening of terrorist groups in Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso to the point where they are now able to negatively influence the functioning of governments. The author describes the activities of the terrorist groups JNIM (Jama’a li-Nusra al-I wa’l-M), ISSP (DAESH in Sahel Province) and ISWAP (DAESH in Western Africa Province), amongst others (Pieter Van Ostaeyen: Terrorist and counter-terrorist activities in the Sahel). In the sixth chapter, Lieutenant Colonel Norbert Daruka, one of the most experienced

bomb disposal officers of the Hungarian Defence Forces, and his co-author Professor László Lukács show how decades of armed conflict in the region have contributed to the proliferation of weapons and explosives and the security risks they pose, not only to participants in conflict but also to the civilian population (Norbert Daruka; László Lukács: Improvised explosive devices and the threat they pose in the Sahel and beyond). In chapter seven, Adeyemi Saheed Badewa, a researcher at the Center for African Studies, University of Pittsburgh, United States examines the multifaceted nature of forced displacement in the Sahel, analysing both its root causes and humanitarian implications. His study provides insights into efforts to address the humanitarian crisis in the region, albeit with little success. The author, who is himself an experienced expert in this field, makes several suggestions for their improvement (Adeyemi Saheed Badewa: *The Sahel: Migration, Displacement and Refugee Crisis*). In the next chapter, readers can learn about the coexistence and relations of Christian-Muslim communities in the countries of the region from different perspectives (László Csicsmann; Scott N. Romaniuk: *Christian-Muslim relations and the future of coexistence in the Sahel region*). The ninth chapter focuses on the humanitarian situation in the region and the challenges related to human trafficking (János Besenyő; Krisztina Kállai: *Management of Humanitarian Operations and Situation in Sahel by applying resilience-based methods in relation to human trafficking*). The last chapter also focuses on the humanitarian situation, with Dr. Béla Szilágyi, who as the head of the Hungarian Baptist Aid, shares his experiences in various humanitarian projects in Chad. The Hungarian NGO is not only involved in projects related to the care of refugees and refugee camps, but also in projects that are important for the host community and can only be tackled in a sophisticated way. Most importantly, they do not only address the immediate needs of IDPs and refugees, but also run long-term, sustainable programmes (Béla Szilágyi: *Chad humanitarian and forced migration situation, a Hungarian experience*).

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