

APRIL 2024



INFOFLASH

**NAVIGATING COMPLEXITY:
SECURITY CHALLENGES AND EU
STRATEGIES IN THE SAHEL AND
WEST AFRICA**

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Introduction

Since achieving independence in the 1960s, several nations across the Sahel and West Africa have grappled with violent extremism stemming from a blend of ineffective governance, economic instability, and the increasing impacts of climate change. This convergence has triggered a surge in violence, conflict, and criminal activities over the past decade, transcending national boundaries and posing formidable challenges to countries both within and beyond the region. The Sahel region remains a crucial transit corridor for migrants journeying from sub-Saharan Africa to northern coastal countries and onward to Europe, presenting, along with mounting terrorism, a significant security concern for the EU (European Parliament, 2021). Further exacerbation of violence could increase displacement and migration rates from the region, compounding pressures on northern and coastal African nations as well as Europe (Center for Preventive Action, 2024). Against this backdrop, this article delves into the multifaceted dynamics shaping the Sahel and West Africa, and examines the root causes of violence, the rise of non-state actors, and the implications of recent geopolitical shifts. It explores the efforts of the EU and other organizations to address these challenges through strategies such as Security Sector Reform (SSR), development assistance, and regional cooperation. The article highlights the obstacles and complexities inherent in these endeavours, offering insights into the evolving landscape of security and governance in the Sahel and West Africa.

Unraveling the Complexities of Violence and Instability in Sahel and West Africa

In Sahel and Western Africa, violence often recurs in specific locations over time due to local factors such as political tensions, resource access disputes, and grievances against state authorities (Radil & Walther, 2024). Key areas significantly affected by violence include the Liptako-Gourma region, spanning Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger, as well as the Dogon Country in eastern Mali and northwestern Burkina Faso (Radil & Walther, 2024). The Lake Chad region also harbours high-intensity zones, particularly in rural and border areas of Niger and Chad (Radil & Walther, 2024). Various factors, including the proliferation of weapons and armed groups, have led to instability in these regions since the collapse of the Libyan state in 2011 (Center for Preventive Action, 2024). This violence often targets rural regions and small urban centres, exacerbating societal fragmentation and reinforcing urban-rural divides (Radil & Walther, 2024).

The decline in international support against terrorism, coupled with weakened regional leadership, has created a vacuum exploited by groups like Jama 'at Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimeen (JNIM) and Islamic State affiliates (Center for Preventive Action, 2024). Non-state actors, including the Wagner Group, have also extended their influence in the absence of foreign intervention (Center for Preventive Action, 2024). For instance, the re-emergence of Boko Haram in Northern Nigeria has had significant repercussions, with the group pledging allegiance to the Islamic State in the West African Province (ISWAP) in 2015, subsequently expanding its control over northeast Nigeria and parts of Niger (Center for Preventive Action, 2024).

Several Sahelian countries destabilized by the jihadist insurgency in the region have experienced putsches leading to the installation of military juntas: this is the case in Niger in July 2023, but also in Burkina Faso (two in 2022), Guinea (2021) and Mali (2020 and 2021) (Breteau, et al., 2023). While each coup had different internal motivations and circumstances, there are some features that seem common among them: the fragility of the governance system, and the emergence of young populist leaders in the African continent (Sohaib & Taifouri, 2023).

The military administrations that assumed control in Mali (2021), Burkina Faso (2022), and Niger (2023) have distanced themselves from France, their former colonial ruler, which until recently spearheaded international efforts to combat jihadists in the Sahel (International Crisis Group, 2024). They have also disregarded the multifaceted approaches – encompassing security, development, and governance – advocated, at least theoretically, by Western allies and the United Nations (International Crisis Group, 2024). All three nations have intensified military campaigns against jihadist groups – and, in Mali’s case, against non-jihadist factions that had previously signed a peace agreement with the government in 2015 (International Crisis Group, 2024). According to the International Crisis Group (2024), they are actively seeking new security partnerships, with Russia being the primary choice.

To top it off, on September 25, 2023, France decided to withdraw its troops from Niger, leaving a gap that could bolster Russian influence (Irish & Mcallister, 2023). Since 2012, the French military engagement in the region has been significant. In 2021, the country began gradually withdrawing its troops from the region, and the last French troops left on 22 December 2023. Before the military junta seized power last year, Niger stood as the final significant ally of the West in the central Sahel region below the Sahara Desert (Irish & Mcallister, 2023). The junta, installed through the coup, subsequently demanded the departure of France (Irish & Mcallister, 2023). Following coups, France’s military presence has been forced out of Mali and Burkina Faso, diminishing its sway in its previous colonies amidst a surge of anti-French sentiment (Irish & Mcallister, 2023).

EU Engagement in the Sahel: Evolving Strategies and Persistent Challenges

The European Union’s engagement with the Sahel region, particularly with the G5 Sahel nations (Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger), holds strategic importance across various fronts, including security, stability, climate responsibility, sustainable development, and managing migration routes linked to Europe (European External Action Service, 2021). Over time, the EU’s approach has evolved from a predominantly security-focused stance to a more comprehensive strategy (European Parliamentary Research Service, 2021).

To address challenges such as irregular migration and terrorism, the Council introduced The EU Strategy for Security and Development in the Sahel in March 2011, aiming for enhanced regional security and development (Council of the European Union, 2011).

This strategy marked the deployment of three Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) missions: EUTM Mali (2012), EUCAP Sahel Niger (2012), and EUCAP Sahel Mali (2014) operating regionally to support the G5 Sahel established in 2014. In this optic, the EU's focus has shifted from "African solutions for African problems" to "Sahelian solutions for Sahelian problems," emphasizing support for the G5 Sahel nations (Plank & Bergmann, 2021).

In April 2015, the Foreign Affairs Council adopted the Sahel regional action plan for 2015-2020, emphasizing security aspects (European Parliament, 2021). Moreover, political science researchers Plank and Bergmann have highlighted the EU's increasing emphasis on hard security measures, such as the deployment of military personnel, the extension of the mandate of military missions, and the establishment of the European Peace Facility - an instrument to enhance the EU's ability to prevent conflicts (Plank & Bergmann, 2021).

Despite these efforts, challenges persist, with the EU's security-focused approach facing criticism for its inability to curb violence and terrorism in the Sahel (European Parliament, 2021). Moreover, insufficient state authority, economic disparities, and human rights violations have contributed to the region's instability (European Parliament, 2021). Financial support from the EU, amounting up to 8 billion euros, has not always achieved its objectives due to the phenomenon of 'extraversion' among local elites in the region since 2014 (Colomba-Petteng, 2023).

Acknowledging these challenges, the 2021 EU's Integrated Strategy adopts a comprehensive approach to improve governance in Sahel nations, addressing human rights, rule of law, and democratic governance concerns by promoting transparency and accountability (European Parliament, 2021). The strategy also highlights Security Sector Reform (SSR) to ensure better respect for human rights and end impunity in military and security circles (European Parliament, 2021). The United Nations (n.d.) approaches SSR as the efforts made by governments and civil society to ensure transparent and responsible security institutions, which not only strengthen security but also enhance societal well-being. However, obstacles such as human rights abuses, state support to non-state armed groups, and regional militarization hinder effective SSR (Venturi & Toure, 2020).

France's withdrawal from the central Sahel has disrupted European security collaboration in the region, leaving a void in leadership. This shift has caused division among EU member states, raising uncertainty about how to adapt to the new circumstances (International Crisis Group, 2024). Consequently, there is a risk of dismantling the mechanisms through which the EU has directed its resources and initiatives. Amidst ongoing conflicts in Ukraine and Gaza, the EU is currently deprioritizing the elaboration of a strategy for the Sahel.

Conclusion

The Sahel region and West Africa grapple with multifaceted challenges, including violent extremism, political instability, and economic fragility, exacerbated by the impacts of climate change. These issues have led to widespread violence and conflict, posing significant security concerns for both regional stability and international actors like the European Union. Despite efforts by the EU and other organizations to address these challenges through various strategies and initiatives, such as Security Sector Reform and development assistance, significant obstacles remain, including governance deficits, human rights abuses, and the rise of non-state actors. Moreover, recent geopolitical shifts, including France's withdrawal from the region and the emergence of new security partnerships, add further complexity to the situation. Looking ahead, a comprehensive and coordinated EU approach that places emphasis on governance, human rights, and regional cooperation will be indispensable in effectively addressing the underlying causes of instability and averting security threats in the African region and elsewhere.

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