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# A Path to Security: Renewing Relationships Within and Beyond the Sahel

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# Executive Summary

The devastating consequences of the wars in Ukraine and Gaza continue to demand the attention of both policymakers and the public, but on another continent a decades-old conflict rages on, and it has global reach and consequences. The Sahel crisis has steadily fallen away from media headlines and the international community's focus.

Despite 20 years of multinational security and counterterrorism operations, the Sahel is now the most terrorism-affected region in the world. Violent-extremist groups terrorise citizens and have destabilised governments, displacing millions of people into neighbouring countries and, increasingly, towards the shores of Europe and the rest of the world.

If the security and stability of the Sahel cannot be guaranteed, nor can that of its neighbours in Africa and beyond. The international community must draw lessons from the past two decades and adapt its engagement with the Sahel to reflect the current realities. This includes finding ways to work constructively with countries in the region – and their current leaders – with a view to restoring constitutional order and improving the quality and delivery of services to citizens. Simply put, given that almost all of the broader Sahel – from Guinea to Sudan, the Atlantic to the Red Sea – is now under some form of post-coup-d'état military rule, pragmatism will be required as decisionmakers from beyond the region consider how best to support these countries.

Failure to engage will see increased insecurity push outmigration to record numbers as the influx of predatory actors taking advantage of the situation poses security implications far beyond the porous borders of the region.

Now is not the moment for the international community to give up on the Sahel. The succession of coups and backsliding of democracy in the region make the need for support more urgent than ever, especially at this time of geopolitical realignment, with countries such as Russia intent on gaining a foothold in the region to square off against the West.

The insecurity in the Sahel is a manifestation of overlapping complexities. Addressing conflict and violence in the region requires an understanding that

development and security go hand in hand. While counterterrorism efforts have been a mainstay of international engagement in the Sahel over the past two decades, their success has been limited, with development, poverty, peacebuilding and governance issues addressed with less urgency and ambition – or simply relegated to the periphery. As a result, citizens across the region feel increasingly disconnected from their governments and institutions.

This call to action comes at a crucial time for the region. Violent-extremist groups are expanding their reach into the neighbouring region and coastal states such as Togo and Benin. The pressures created by climate change are increasing as it continues to disrupt livelihoods and social dynamics.

Governments and economies are failing to keep up with the aspirations of a growing population. Rising instability and increasing hardship have triggered the migration and displacement of millions as local populations seek safety and opportunity in the region and beyond. Yet all these factors create the conditions for a bolder and more ambitious partnership for the region; this paper concludes with a high-level action plan to ensure the Sahel's next 20 years – and beyond – are more peaceful and prosperous than the last. The plan's recommendations include:

- **A new Sahel Compact**, building on lessons learned from the Sahel Alliance and other initiatives, is required to leverage new and ambitious resources for the region's development. A renewed partnership between the Sahel countries, their current leadership and the wider international community (beyond Europe and North America) – to scale up investments in peacebuilding and intercommunal dialogue, inclusive development, energy, infrastructure and, crucially, effective governance – can unleash the potential of the Sahel and address the root causes of instability and inequality that fuel violence.
- **Initiating security-sector reform** as a central pillar of a more comprehensive strategy to restore the social contract between governments and citizens. This includes disbanding state-sanctioned militias that often contribute to human-rights abuses and fostering the development of accountable security forces that operate with respect for the rule of law. Effective security forces that enjoy the trust of the population are essential for creating a safe and stable environment conducive to long-term development.
- **Reconnecting governments and citizens** by supporting governments

to improve the delivery, quality, accountability and visibility of state services. Effective communication and inclusive growth and development must also be prioritised, and the primacy of constitutional norms, democratic principles and human rights reaffirmed.

- **Strengthening regional organisations and regional cooperation,** including to enhance the pace and scale of electrification in the Sahel, and to facilitate and encourage enhanced information- and intelligence-sharing between Sahel countries and their neighbours, especially in critical border areas.
- **Preventing the spread of insecurity** beyond the Sahel by accelerating partnerships with coastal states, supporting the Accra Initiative and deepening partnerships aimed at providing adequate funding for critical infrastructure.

# 02

## Introduction

Across the Sahel – a term which, when used in this paper, implies a focus on Mauritania, Niger, Burkina Faso, Mali and Chad unless otherwise specified – millions have been displaced by violence. And as violence is increasing, so is political instability: since 2020 the Sahel has experienced six coups in four countries.

Burkina Faso and Mali are among the five countries in the world that experienced the greatest number of terrorism fatalities in 2022, and terrorism-related deaths in the Sahel account for nearly half of the global total.<sup>1</sup> Violent-extremist groups now effectively control half of Burkina Faso's territory.

Countries neighbouring the Sahel region, such as Togo and Benin, experienced an increase in the number of terror attacks in 2022 and 2023 from groups operating across the border in Burkina Faso and Niger. In Benin's case, the number of fatalities attributed to spillover activity from Burkina Faso doubled in 2023 (to 150) from the previous year.<sup>2</sup> The region is also threatened by the spillover of insecurity from northern Nigeria and the Lake Chad basin, where the impacts of climate change continue to disrupt livelihoods and exacerbate violence.

The Sahel remains one of the poorest regions of the world, unable to provide inclusive development for its peoples, especially youth – girls in particular – and women, and harness the economic potential of its natural resources. Its current energy infrastructure is incapable of meeting today's needs and contributing to the region's future development. Indeed, as the International Energy Agency reminds us, “two-thirds of the Sahel population does not have access to electricity and the regional disparities are great.”<sup>3</sup>

Transnational Salafist ideology and transnational crime thrive in this context of insecurity, instability and poverty. Both exploit historical grievances and the resentment of marginalised communities. National governments, operating with highly centralised models, are unable to effectively project the presence and authority of state institutions across their entire countries. Armed groups and gangs fill the void. For some communities, forming alliances with jihadist groups helps them advance their own historical political objectives against a central government. In other cases, jihadist groups provide local communities

with the basic services that central governments are unable to deliver. Ecological fragility, climate change, political instability, pastoral conflict, food insecurity, human-rights abuses and violence perpetrated by state security forces compound the situation and are driving many young people to join violent-extremist groups or criminal gangs.

The Sahel's fast-growing population is already putting tremendous pressure on governments and fragile state institutions. Projections based on current statistics estimate that the combined population of Senegal, Mauritania, Niger, Mali, Burkina Faso and Chad currently at 90 million will more than double to 240 million by 2050. Governments and policymakers, in the region and beyond, cannot ignore the impact of this rapid population growth on an already delicate ecosystem, on public services and infrastructure that are currently struggling to meet the needs of citizens, and on economies that are simply not creating enough jobs and opportunities.

The security and stability of the Sahel are vital to the security and stability of its neighbouring regions on the continent and across the Mediterranean into Europe. Faced with a succession of coups and a democratic backslide in the region, now is not the time for the international community to give up on the Sahel and its peoples, especially at this time of geopolitical realignment. Russia, China and Iran have their own strategic interests in the region – interests that are at odds with those of the West and the international rules-based order and, more importantly, with those of the millions of men and women in the Sahel who have fought long and hard for democracy, the rule of law and security.

Policymakers and political leaders in the Sahel and the broad international community must also recognise that no country in the region can combat, deter and eliminate violent-extremist organisations on its own. International military cooperation is necessary (in addition to bolder investment in infrastructure and human capital), and some form of multilateral military presence will be required to combat jihadist groups and stabilise territories. But there should also be a clear understanding that as an international community, our approach needs to change.

The growing jihadist and violent-extremist threat in the region often hides a more critical and no less complex reality: the rise in intercommunal violence and conflict (between pastoralist and agrarian communities, for example) that reflect a growing breakdown of the state's ability to mediate and resolve

internal tensions and conflicts.



# 03

## Insecurity in the Sahel

### THE SAHEL CRISIS: LIBYA AND ALGERIA'S LEGACY

The rise in violence and terrorist activity in the Sahel over the past 15 years is striking. According to recent analysis, terrorism deaths rose over 2,800 per cent between 2008 and 2023.<sup>4</sup>

To properly understand the current instability and insecurity in the Sahel and this explosion of violence, it is necessary to take a hard look at the consequences of the international community's response to the fall of Muammar Qaddafi's regime in Libya.

Indeed, the West may have underestimated the consequences of accelerating regime change in Libya on its increasingly fragile neighbouring region.

The fall of the Qaddafi regime in 2011 left a political and institutional void, which in turn initiated a ferocious competition among local armed groups and a civil war in Libya. As a result of the utter collapse of the state, between 2011 and 2014 Libya became a main source from which weapons were smuggled through Niger and Chad. This illicit trade was powered by criminal networks' trafficking, and by the foreign mercenaries leaving Libya and returning to their home countries in the Sahel with important stocks of looted weapons and munitions. Tuareg fighters in Mali and various rebel and armed groups across the Sahel and the Lake Chad Basin became significantly better equipped and emboldened as a result.

From 2014, enhanced security at the Niger-Libya border – a focus of multilateral security operations – as well as the breakout of Libya's second civil war led to a substantial drop in arms flows out of the country. As many observers have concluded, this reduction in supply forced violent-extremist groups to look elsewhere, "escalating attacks on army barracks in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger to loot their arms and ammunition stockpiles".<sup>5</sup>

Since a ceasefire was agreed in 2020, weapons smuggling from Libya has been increasing again, although not at pre-2014 levels. However, Libya is now a supply line in the region for newly manufactured weapons.<sup>6</sup>

Weapons and demobilised mercenaries were not the only significant outflows from Libya after the collapse of the Gaddafi regime. The country's first civil war also saw the return of more than 200,000 migrants from Libya to their home countries, thus compounding the existing fragility of countries such as Chad and Niger.

Similarly to Libya, Algeria also occupies a strategic position as a gateway to the Sahel. Its role in maintaining security and stability along its 2,300-kilometre-long border with Mali and Niger makes the country a key stakeholder in this crisis.

Some of the key extremist groups operating in the region are a product of the Algerian civil war in the 1990s. Notably, al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb was originally formed in 1998 in Algeria with the aim of overthrowing the country's civilian authorities.

Algeria also has extensive experience in engaging with Tuareg groups within the country and the wider region. It played a prominent role as a mediator during the Tuareg rebellions in Mali and Niger.

The most recent demonstration of Algeria's important diplomatic role in the region was its role in brokering the 2015 Algiers peace agreement between Mali and a majority-Tuareg alliance of rebel groups. Since 2023, diplomatic relations between the Algerian and Malian governments have deteriorated, resulting in the suspension of the agreement by Mali in January 2024. However, Algeria remains committed to addressing border security and is actively seeking to resume negotiations with Mali and exploring the potential involvement of other nations.

In addition, Algeria sought last year to mediate between the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the Nigerien junta to avoid a possible armed intervention to restore Niger's deposed president. While these mediation attempts failed, renewed Algerian involvement in the Sahelian crisis should be welcomed and supported.

## **A WORSENING HUMANITARIAN CRISIS**

In 2022, the deteriorating security conditions and increased violence across the Sahel left 3 million people displaced within their own countries. At the end of that year, the number of internally displaced people in Burkina Faso alone

reached close to 2 million people – an increase of 300,000 from the previous year, illustrating the worsening security situation in the country.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, women and girls in the Central Sahel experience some of the highest rates of gender-based violence in the world.

There are nearly 13 million people facing food insecurity in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger,<sup>8</sup> and 9,000 schools have closed in these countries due to conflict and attacks by violent-extremist groups. In Burkina Faso alone, 1 million students are now out of school. The tragedy of this potentially “lost generation” of Sahelian youth, denied education and safe places of learning, is no less shocking and urgent than the situation was for young people during the Syria crisis, which led to a mobilisation of the international community that continues to this day.

And while migration from the Sahel into Europe generates much media attention, and is expected to increase, intraregional migration flows are very high and put tremendous pressure on already fragile countries in the region. It is estimated that there are more than 8 million migrants within Western Africa, representing, according to the International Office for Migration, the largest migrant stock in Africa (the total number of migrants on the continent is 25 million).<sup>9</sup>

### **THE LIMITED SUCCESS OF INTERNATIONAL SECURITY RESPONSES ...**

Since 2001, responses to violent extremism globally have been shaped by narrow, security-driven militarised responses. In the Sahel, we have seen a series of multinational security operations, focusing on counterterrorism action and targeting violent-extremist groups, succeed or complement each other. These operations include the Multinational Joint Task Force, the G5 Sahel Joint Force, the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), Operation Serval and Operation Barkhane.

Despite early successes at combatting extremist groups, it is clear that “more than a decade of standalone security-driven approaches, with substantial support from the US and Europe, [have] had limited long-term impact on security and stability in the region” and have done very little to address the root causes of violent extremism.<sup>10</sup>

These multilateral security operations all suffer from the same challenges: the lack of adequate capacity among national security forces, poor coordination

with various counterterrorism missions operating in the same theatre and, in many cases, a singular focus on military objectives.

In addition, unequal burden-sharing among troop-contributing nations (often the result of weak domestic political support for such missions) reduces the operations' effectiveness by constraining their capacity.

Too often, donor countries have sent troops and equipment into the Sahel as an extension of their own domestic fight against terror rather than with the ambition to tackle the drivers of insecurity or to protect Sahelian civilians.

A weakened state, unable to secure its territory or meet the basic needs of its growing population, breeds alienation and distrust upon which violent-extremist groups thrive. Yet governance and peacebuilding remain at the periphery of multilateral and national efforts aimed at preventing violent extremism.

While humanitarian assistance has increased since 2010, data collected by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's Development Assistance Committee show that official-development-assistance (ODA) funding to efforts aimed at preventing violent extremism (peacebuilding and security-sector reform) has been the least funded, representing only 2 per cent of ODA investments in Africa.

The imbalance is striking. Further data compiled by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) looking at eight countries in the greater Sahel region most affected by violent extremism indicate that peacebuilding and security-sector reform – not hard security infrastructure – have consistently received the lowest share of international development assistance over the past ten years, receiving only 4 per cent of total ODA.

The termination of MINUSMA, the UN's peacekeeping operation in Mali, at the request of the Malian junta does not bode well for security in the country and for the protection of civilians. Despite its faults, MINUSMA, as an integrated stabilisation mission, did have a peacebuilding mandate. Violence began to rise as operations wound down and this rise has continued since all troops were withdrawn at the end of 2023. In 2023 Mali registered the largest number in its history of violent incidents involving extremist groups. Such violence has increased “nearly three-fold from when the junta seized power in 2020.”<sup>11</sup>

As governments both in the region and beyond grapple with the worsening

security outlook in the Sahel, we cannot continue to look at the problem the same way and push for responses that ignore the importance of peacebuilding, preventing violent extremism and effective governance of the security sector.

### **... AND THE FAILURES OF STATE SECURITY FORCES**

State security forces play an essential role in an effective approach to countering violent extremism. The ultimate role of the state, after all, is to protect its citizens from violence. Although there is an obvious imbalance between counterterrorism operations and prevention throughout the Sahel, the importance of building the capacity of state security forces cannot be denied.

But the international community is supporting state institutions and security forces that are fundamentally mistrusted and feared by citizens – and whose members commit crimes such as torture and extrajudicial killings of civilians with impunity.

There has been an alarming increase in state-perpetrated violence in the Sahel. Starting in 2020, in both Mali and Burkina Faso more civilians have been killed by national security forces than by Islamist militant groups.<sup>12</sup>

Furthermore, national military forces also contribute to the increasing number of weapons circulating in the region. These include weapons captured on the battlefield, but also theft from armouries, as well as arms purchased from corrupt elements in the military.<sup>13</sup>

The Malian and Burkinabe governments have relied on arming ethnic militias as part of their counterterrorism strategy. There is ample evidence that such a strategy has in fact stoked inter-ethnic tensions. In Burkina Faso there are many recent documented cases of attacks on the Fulani minority by the state-sponsored militia Volunteers for the Defence of the Homeland (VDP). These attacks only fuel a spiral of violence, with jihadist groups targeting villages and communities seen as supportive of the VDP.

As victimised communities turn to jihadist or other violent-extremist groups for protection, these groups are all too happy to exploit mistreatment of civilian populations by state security forces and institutions for their own purposes, be that cultivating political support, raising revenue through taxes and levies or

recruiting fighters.

Furthermore, the use of private military companies (PMCs) further degrades the state's effectiveness and credibility. In addition to dubious financial arrangements between the junta and PMCs, mercenaries such as members of the Wagner Group in Mali operate outside the civilian-military accountability framework and international law. Their brutality fuels more violence by extremist groups. Close to four in every five events involving Wagner mercenaries in central Mali in the first half of 2023 have been classified as violence against civilians.<sup>14</sup>

The power struggle in Russia between the leadership of the Wagner Group and the Kremlin has not diminished the prospects of Russian military contractors in the Sahel or wider sub-Saharan Africa. On the contrary, in Africa the Wagner Group, now seemingly rebranded as Russia's Africa Corps, is more integrated than ever in Russia's military and foreign policy apparatus: in February 2024, the UK Ministry of Defence reported that Rosgvardia, Russia's national guard, was incorporating former Wagner assault detachments into its volunteer corps, which "highly likely indicates that Wagner has been successfully subordinated to Rosgvardia, increasing the State's command and control over the Wagner Group."<sup>15</sup>

The arrival of Africa Corps members in Burkina Faso in November 2023 signalled a potential for increased violence against both extremist groups and civilians by Russian PMCs and government security forces, as we have seen in Mali and the Central African Republic. It also confirmed Russia's determination to pursue its geopolitical interests on the continent.

Enhanced partnerships between Sahel governments and key allies like Russia, China and Iran in the security domain pose challenges and further undermine the likelihood of reinforcing the social contract between governments and their citizens. These actors prioritise security cooperation solely for economic gain, lacking commitment to governance or essential social cohesion measures that should always accompany security initiatives.

## **LESSONS FROM MORE THAN 20 YEARS OF MULTILATERAL POLITICAL AND DEVELOPMENT MOBILISATION**

Key members of the international community, including many African countries, have stepped up to meet the challenges of the Sahel crisis,

although coalition building and mobilisation for enhanced donor support for the region have moved at a slower pace than activity on the military and counterterrorism side.

In 2014, with France's support, Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger created the G5 Sahel as an institutional mechanism to coordinate a regional response to the crisis. To support the G5's priorities, in 2017 France, Germany and the European Union launched the Sahel Alliance, a funding-coordination tool focused on five sectors of the region: agriculture, rural development and food security; education and youth employment; governance; decentralisation and basic services; and energy.

In 2021, the total value of development projects tracked by the Sahel Alliance stood at €26.5 billion. As laudable as this initiative is, it does not represent a large-scale mobilisation of new and additional resources for the Sahel's development. It has provided a useful framework for information sharing among its members but has fallen short of its objectives to strengthen cooperation among donors on the ground. Indeed, the experience of the Sahel Alliance demonstrates the difficulties faced by international development partners to harmonise their respective priorities and procedures. Furthermore, despite Canada and the US's recent decisions to join the alliance as full members, it remains a European-led initiative.

As a response to the growing reach of jihadist and violent-extremist groups in the Sahel and the deteriorating security situation, in 2020 France also initiated the creation of the Sahel Coalition, aimed at improving burden-sharing among international partners for security assistance and security operations in the region.

But with Mali's decision to exit the G5 and cease its military cooperation with France, and subsequent coups in Burkina Faso and Niger, the G5 is for all intents and purposes defunct. Indeed, on 6 December 2023 Mauritania and Chad formally announced the dissolution of the group, three days after Ouagadougou and Niamey declared their withdrawal from the organisation. This leaves the Sahel Alliance and the Sahel Coalition without an institutional regional interlocutor. At this stage, the Alliance of Sahel States (ASS), a pact created by the three transitional governments in Niamey, Ouagadougou and Bamako in September 2023, is not viable.

Further complicating matters was the decision announced on 28 January 2024

by the transitional authorities of Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso to withdraw their countries from ECOWAS – a process that will take up to a year, but which has the potential to lead to much more political, economic and social turmoil in the region.

The deteriorating security and political situation in the Sahel and the breakdown of existing international security cooperation activities – however flawed they may be – highlight the importance of preventing the expansion of terrorism and violent extremism into neighbouring coastal states. The 2017 Accra Initiative, which brings together several west African countries (including Burkina Faso, Niger and Mali) to combat the expansion of terrorist groups into coastal west African states through intelligence sharing and cross-border security activities, will be called to expand its work and capacity as a new regional-cooperation mechanism.<sup>16</sup>

### **COUPS IN PERSPECTIVE**

The rise in fatalities from organised political violence in the region has, of course, greatly contributed to the political upheaval in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger and the subsequent coups in these countries over the past two years. Indeed, violence is at its worst since 2012. “There were 30 per cent more security incidents in 2022 than in 2021, and fatalities almost doubled to more than 10,000” in those three countries, according to the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project.<sup>17</sup>

However, the coups in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger are more than simple takeovers by frustrated army corps trying to save the state from insurgents and what they perceive as overwhelmed civilian leadership. Nor can the motivation for these coups be reduced to anti-French and pan-African sentiments.

While these coups stemmed from common regional issues such as insecurity, growing violence or unemployment, ignoring the specific national and political contexts in which they developed would be a mistake.

The growing insecurity and unresolved conflict with separatist Tuareg groups in the north were key factors in Mali’s coups in 2020 and 2021. But increasing corruption and political instability were the real triggers. In August 2020, a group of Malian military officers led by Colonel Assimi Goïta overthrew President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta. This followed waves of protests after the



Constitutional Court tipped the balance in favour of the governing party by allocating it ten additional seats after the results of the much-delayed and much-contested April legislative elections. A year later, Colonel Goïta overthrew the interim government, appointed himself president and has since postponed the planned February 2024 elections.

In Burkina Faso, growing frustration and anger among military ranks about wages and the considerable number of military and police fatalities at the hands of violent-extremist groups – which now control over 40 per cent of the country – led to a first military coup in January 2022 by Lieutenant Colonel Paul-Henri Damiba. Eight months later, members of the military deposed the head of the military junta and named a new president, Captain Ibrahim Traoré. This second coup not only highlights the divisions within the army over counterterrorism strategy but was also carried out as a reaction to first coup leader Damiba's rapprochement with former President Blaise Compaoré.

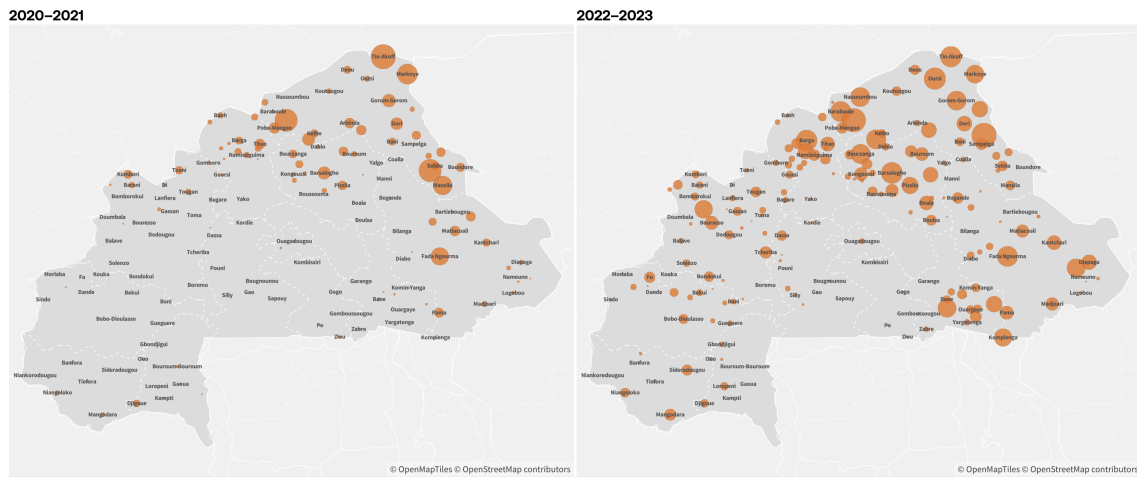
Although much has been said about anti-French sentiment in Niger and other Sahel countries, it is clear that Niger's coup is more opportunistic in nature rather than a reaction to President Mohamed Bazoum's alignment with France. It would appear that when he was detained by the Nigerien presidential guard in the July 2023 coup, President Bazoum was a victim of changing allegiances within his own camp following his stated intent to reopen oil-revenue-sharing arrangements, as well as the refusal of Abdourahmane Tchiani (head of the presidential guard and leader of the coup) to respect the mandatory retirement age. Niger was making measurable progress on social development and in combatting and containing violent-extremist groups. The government was actively supporting local peacebuilding and intercommunal-dialogue initiatives. Fatalities from violence in Niger, including civilians and combatants, dropped by a third between 2021 and 2022 to just below 1,000 and totalled fewer than 450 in the first six months of 2023.

All three situations, however, highlight the breakdown of government authority and the failure of the state to effectively project its presence and credibility among citizens and deliver basic services. In the case of Mali and Burkina Faso, the military juntas have failed in their stated objective of restoring security and containing the reach of violent-extremist groups. Over 6,000 square kilometres of Malian territory were afflicted by militant Islamist violence in the first six months of 2023, compared with 5,200 square kilometres in the previous six months (an increase of 18 per cent).<sup>18</sup> In Burkina Faso, violent-

extremist groups now control more than half the country's territory. The number of fatalities resulting from attacks by violent-extremist groups doubled in 2023 from the previous year to 7,762.<sup>19</sup>

FIGURE 1

## Number of fatalities in extremism-group-related incidents from 2020 to 2023 in Burkina Faso



Source: Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project; reprinted by permission of Africa Center for Strategic Studies

# 04

## Development Gains in Jeopardy

### DECADES OF FRAGILE AND SLOW PROGRESS ...

There have been substantial development gains in the Sahel as a result of sustained efforts by national governments and the donor community over the past 20 years – notably in health and education, as well as basic infrastructure and energy.

- Mortality rates have decreased for children under five.
- Adolescent fertility rates have also decreased.
- Over the past 15 years, access to education has improved across the Sahel. Primary-school enrolment has almost doubled, while enrolment for secondary school has tripled.<sup>20</sup> Lower-secondary completion rates have also increased.
- Access to electricity has increased, although intraregional disparities remain acute (for instance, 70 per cent of Senegal's population has access to electricity compared with 8 per cent of the population in Chad).

Despite progress on these fronts and others, all G5 Sahel countries still rank in the bottom 20 per cent of countries globally on the latest UNDP Human Development Index (HDI).<sup>21</sup>

### ... AT RISK OF REGRESSING

The G5 Sahel countries' low HDI ranking highlights the fragility of the region and the growing threats posed by insecurity, violence, governance challenges and institutions lacking support, as well as the increasingly destabilising effects of climate change. Indeed, environmental factors and climate change will further compound existing fragilities: currently 41 per cent of the population in the Sahel is food insecure, and crop yields are projected to decrease by 11.3 per cent by 2050 in a region where 95 per cent of agriculture is dependent on rainfall.<sup>22</sup>

New data highlight the growing link between climate change, fragility and

insecurity. Recent field research undertaken by the United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research reveals that half of recruits interviewed in Niger cited “climate-change-related difficulties as one of their reasons for joining a [violent-extremist] group.”<sup>23</sup>

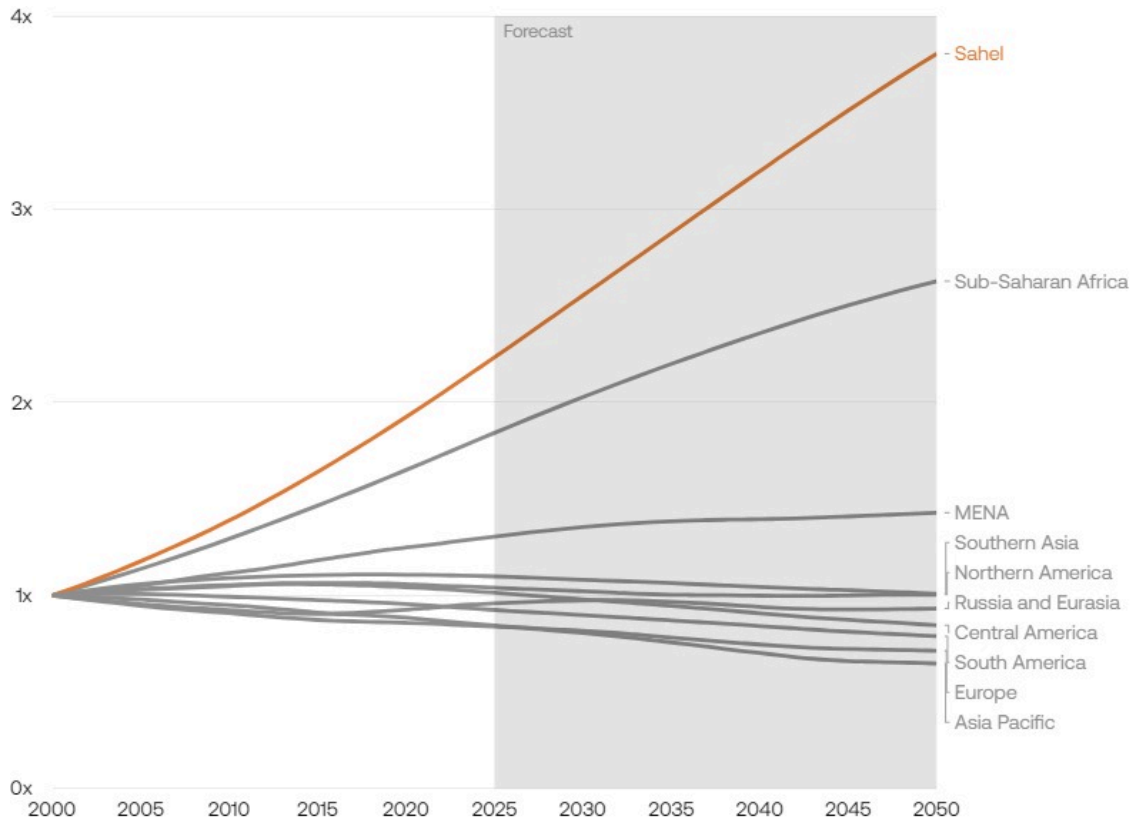
Recent political instability in the Sahel should serve as a reminder of the devastating cost of coups on national economies. Coups in Guinea (2008) and Mali (2012) left each country with an accumulated loss of 12.1 per cent and 13.5 per cent respectively of total gross GDP in the year following each coup.

Although the countries across the Sahel are diverse, there is at least one common thread across the region: a large, disaffected young population eager for a different narrative and upward economic and social mobility. With 64.5 per cent of the population below the age of 25, the Sahel is one of the world’s most youthful regions. Youth unemployment, however, remains extremely high when compared with sub-Saharan Africa at large. Although there are few statistics on youth unemployment in the Sahel, a recent report released by the United Nations Population Fund estimated that figure to be as high as 27 per cent.<sup>24</sup>

As this report, which examined the link between the large youth population and insecurity, put it: “the root causes of radicalisation and violent extremism have often been associated with a growing youth population and the inability of governments to respond effectively to their various political and economic demands.”<sup>25</sup> As noted earlier, the projected doubling of the Sahel’s population by 2050 and slow progress on development goals and poverty reduction, combined with multiple layers of fragility, do not bode well for a reduction in conflict and instability in the region any time soon under a business-as-usual scenario.

FIGURE 2

## Youth-population trends, 1950–2050



Source: United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, "World Population Prospects 2022"

# 05

## Rebuilding the Social Contract

### **BETTER GOVERNANCE**

The multidimensional crisis in the Sahel is fundamentally driven by poverty and poor governance, and military regimes are, by definition, unable to federate and coordinate the complex response it requires. Long-term stability in the region can be reached only if the social pact is rebuilt between states and their citizens.

Jihadist order thrives on the threat and execution of violence and the absence of effective public services and a state presence. Where conventional democratic governance fails, these extremist groups act as de facto governments, imposing order and dispensing justice, solving disputes, raising revenue through taxes and levies, providing employment and organising basic service delivery at the local level.

Governments must create and sustain an effective security environment and deliver basic services to citizens. However, military considerations and approaches have now dominated the security conversation in the Sahel for the better part of two decades without noteworthy progress either for development or towards better governance. Investment in governance has declined whereas security budgets have exploded. But the blame can be shared equally among governments in the Sahel and in Western capitals, with many international donors determined to advance their security objectives with little regard for the accountability of their Sahel partners.

To be effective, governance must be inclusive. While some countries in the Sahel have developed internal mechanisms to ensure the representation of minority groups, many minorities are still significantly excluded. Marginalisation of Tuareg groups represents one of the most notable cases, with clear repercussions still unfolding before our eyes in Mali as fighting continues in the country's north between Tuareg rebels and the national military. Niger's efforts, prior to the July 2023 coup, to sustain intercommunal dialogue offer a model that could inspire its neighbours.

Evidence shows that good governance is key to stability and security. Democratic governments are generally more effective at providing security

and stability than military or transitional governments. The recent experience of coastal west Africa illustrates this point. The region has become more peaceful over the past 15 years despite the violence in the neighbouring Sahel and the intercommunal challenges within many coastal states. To a large extent, improvements in governance and political stability as well as increased resources for policing and security services have played a key role in increasing peace.<sup>26</sup> Lessons can be learned from this experience, including from the successful transitions and peace processes in Sierra Leone and Liberia.

### **MEASURING RESULTS AND ACCOUNTABILITY**

Strengthening democratic governance and the bonds between citizens and their institutions rests on the ability to show and measure results – in short, that governments are producing the change and the progress they were entrusted to deliver. To do this, institutions, mechanisms and behaviours are needed that do not exist in a military government.

Governments and public administrations in the Sahel should focus on improving the delivery, quality and accountability of state services at all levels by developing the technical capabilities of the civil service, whose ranks are also inadequate to meet the demands of the population (in Mali, for example, there are six civil servants per 1,000 inhabitants, compared to 70 in the United States and 90 in France).<sup>27</sup> The focus must be practical delivery that has an immediate effect on quality of life and inclusive growth.

With the support of the international community, the geographic reach of the Sahel's governments must expand with time. International partners should support national governments to immediately stabilise newly secured areas by projecting effective state institutions and delivering high-quality services as quickly as possible. Development must be a priority and will require a shift in national budgets that have seen increases in security and military spending outpace the rate of growth of health and education budgets.

Finally, citizens will only trust governments that are accountable. National authorities need to report back to their citizens and communicate more effectively, including to international partners. This approach also includes consulting and engaging citizens for better decision-making and then communicating results, based on transparent data.

This focus on governance to help drive attention towards the root causes of insecurity is also necessary to properly harness the tremendous potential of the Sahel and its peoples. Between 2010 and 2019, the region's economy grew by an annual average of 4.8 per cent, one of the highest growth rates in sub-Saharan Africa. As drivers of future growth and development, investments in electrification and energy infrastructure are essential and can be scaled up, providing ample opportunities for investors. The Sahel has abundant mineral resources and lucrative crops such as cotton (with Mali recording its largest-ever cotton production in 2022). And there is ample evidence in recent history elsewhere on the continent and in the world that a large cohort of educated and technologically literate young people can help drive economic development, entrepreneurship and innovation, as the efforts of policymakers in Rwanda and Ethiopia remind us. This can also be true for the Sahel.



# 06

## A Call to Action

The international community must rethink and renew its commitment to the Sahel before the weight of democratic breakdown, long-standing frustrations and predatory actors accelerate the collapse of what order remains in the region. This means engaging with current Sahel leaders. Partnership must urgently be renewed between the Sahel's governments and their citizens. Poverty, inequalities and weak institutions are the main factors in determining a country's vulnerability to a coup, providing the fertile conditions in which violent extremism thrives.

This section is intended as a high-level action plan for the international community to tackle the insecurity in the region.

Historically, donors review their bilateral development assistance to countries that experience a military coup. Aid is generally pared down to essential humanitarian assistance, and support for health and education. Donors also generally suspend government-to-government cooperation to manage the delivery of development assistance and instead seek to work with non-governmental or multilateral organisations until constitutional order is restored.

With the Sahel region – from Guinea to Sudan, from the Atlantic to the Red Sea – now broadly under some form of post-coup d'état military rule, the international donor community needs to rethink how it engages with these countries.

Due to the magnitude and breadth of the challenges facing the region, freezing development assistance or suspending technical support to public administrations after a coup does not work. Although sanctions can be effective tools, economic sanctions often have greater consequences on populations than on military leaders, potentially fuelling a chain reaction that can increase the likelihood of internal conflict and escalate threats to neighbouring regions.

The disruptive impacts of coups on the delivery of bilateral development assistance should lead donors to rethink their approach to programming. Some donors are now considering working more at the municipal and local administrative levels rather than with national administrations. This approach's

advantages include greater proximity to and impact of services for citizens. That said, the international community may have to engage with military transitional authorities, especially given the geopolitical interests at play; this paper's plan for action prioritises the restoration or strengthening of democratic governance, while ensuring that citizens living under post-coup regimes aren't prevented from receiving the development assistance they need.

A renewed approach for the security and stability of the Sahel and its peoples requires a bolder development agenda that puts governance priorities and a reset of the social contract between states and citizens at its centre. This approach comprises five key elements, outlined below, and the international community must take the following actions to realise each element.

### **1. COORDINATING AND MOBILISING DONORS**

- Elevate the importance of finding meaningful and impactful solutions for the region through an alliance of European countries, the US and other critical players such as the Gulf States and Turkey.
- Members of this alliance should develop a Compact for the Sahel that brings together Sahel countries and bilateral donors, multilateral development banks, the private sector and philanthropic partners to scale up investments and funding mechanisms in the Sahel that will focus on human development, governance and infrastructure.
- The political leadership of this initiative for renewed mobilisation for the Sahel must reflect a diversity and breadth that goes beyond the US and Europe, although enhanced political engagement by the US is critical.
- The compact should make it clear that eligibility for scaled-up compact financing is conditional upon a country having restored constitutional order (including national elections) or committed to an internationally mediated timetable to that end.
- The compact should build on lessons learned from existing initiatives such as the Sahel Alliance and the Sahel Coalition. Namely, the compact should establish a clear counterpart (national governments or a regional organisation). Next, there should be clear, concrete and measurable objectives – preferably some comprehensive programmes

that different institutions may efficiently support despite their various procedures.

- Security strategies and approaches should be designed that go beyond the narrow lens of counterterrorism, or combatting violent extremism, to include governance and peacebuilding.
- Humanitarian action remains essential in the Sahelian context. However, mechanisms need to ensure adequate implementation of the humanitarian-development-security nexus. Humanitarian, development and peacebuilding actors need to develop and deliver common strategies and objectives that go beyond traditional and siloed approaches.

## **2. REFORMING THE SECURITY SECTOR AND RESETTING CIVIL-MILITARY RELATIONS**

- Restore the social contract between governments and citizens; this also means that donors must be stricter in calling out impunity and corruption and make their funding, including security-sector funding, tied to clear accountabilities and more conditional on anti-corruption measures.
- Make security-sector reform, including the disbandment of state-sanctioned militias, a greater priority for donors and countries in the Sahel.
- Ensure the security sector is citizen-centred and that security initiatives undertaken by governments and national institutions respond to the needs of local communities. In particular, ensure that addressing gender-based violence is prioritised in national security strategies.
- Increase support for governance and peacebuilding activities in the region.

## **3. RECONNECTING GOVERNMENTS AND CITIZENS AND DEEPENING DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE**

- Donors and international partners must reaffirm the primacy of constitutional norms, democratic principles and human rights.

- Focus on improving the delivery, quality and accountability of state services at all levels by developing the technical capabilities of Sahel countries' civil services.
- Support governments in shifting their focus to practical delivery that immediately affects the quality of life and inclusive growth.
- Make inclusive development a priority for governments across the Sahel by ensuring government strategies have clearly defined objectives, that service standards are clear and governments report back to citizens.
- Help governments immediately stabilise newly secured areas by projecting effective state institutions and public services as quickly as possible.
- Governments in the Sahel must communicate more effectively with citizens, not only to improve consultations for better decision-making but also to communicate results.

#### **4. STRENGTHENING REGIONAL ORGANISATIONS AND REGIONAL COOPERATION**

- Facilitate and encourage enhanced information- and intelligence-sharing between Sahel countries and their neighbours, especially in critical border areas.
- Strengthen the capacity of regional organisations and development banks to deliver results and effectively execute their strategies.
- Enhance the pace and scale of electrification in the Sahel, even in coup-affected countries, especially beyond urban centres and into rural communities.
- Recognise the importance of ECOWAS's West African Power Pool initiative. Economic integration is key to reinforcing cooperation among states despite different geopolitical orientations. To this aim, it is crucial that the ASS's intention to exit ECOWAS does not lead to its exclusion from regional technical initiatives.

## **5. SUPPORTING NEIGHBOURING REGIONS OF THE SAHEL TO PREVENT THE SPREAD OF INSECURITY**

- Accelerate partnerships with coastal states to enhance their governments' capacities to deliver quality public services to their citizens, including effective security.
- Support the Accra Initiative, recognising the importance of this initiative continuing to be fully driven by west African states. Deepen partnerships aimed at providing adequate funding for critical infrastructure.

Taken together, these actions propose a reset. The past two tumultuous years in the region – and the past 20 years of multilateral counterterrorism efforts that have characterised international engagement with it – have demonstrated beyond question that a renewed partnership between the Sahel countries and the international community is required. One that recognises the urgency of addressing the root causes of the insecurity destabilising communities across the Sahel, acknowledges the need to work with the leaders currently in power and tackles the fundamental issue facing its nations today: the need to reconnect governments and citizens and rebuild the social contract between them.

# 07

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# Endnotes

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