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Instability in the Sahel: An Opportunity for the Arab Gulf States?

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Instability in the Sahel: An Opportunity for the Arab Gulf States?

In 2011, Mali was considered one of the most successful examples of democracy in Africa, despite experiencing a long-standing governance crisis linked to corruption and transnational criminal cartels, as well as [sectarian and interethnic violence](#) used to impose Bamako's authority in the north. By 2012, well-armed and battle-hardened Malian Tuareg, however, had returned from fighting in Libya [in support of Gadhafi](#) and drew on their fighting experience to form an armed rebellion against the Malian government, repeating a pattern of uprisings that had affected the country from 1962-1964, 1991-1992, and 2006-2009. This, coupled with the National Movement for the Liberation of the Azawad (MNLA) and the growth of [Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb \(AQIM\) from 2007](#) highlighted a series of governance and security sector failures. The 1992 National Pact and 2006 Algiers Agreement failed to resolve the root causes of the conflict dynamic and amid a deteriorating security situation, the Malian army stepped in to stage a coup in 2012.

The subsequent infighting and failure of the MNLA strengthened violent Islamist groups, led by AQIM and Ansar Dine. In response, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) imposed sanctions, and the African Union (AU) deployed a peace enforcement mission as part of the African-led International Support Mission to Mali (AFISMA). Due to the deteriorating security situation, with Islamists quickly taking over the north, displacing Tuareg rebels and threatening the main base of the Malian army in Gao, foreign intervention was always going to be a possibility but difficult to do in a country that is generally non-policed, with porous borders, and that is sparsely populated.

France Steps In

Following UN Security Council Resolution 2085 in December 2012, France's then President François Hollande committed 4,500 troops to Mali under Operation Serval, a French-Chadian operation that supplemented AFISMA from January 2013 to July 2014. This was part of the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA). Operation Serval was renamed Operation Barkhane on 1 August 2014, and President Hollande increased French troop numbers to 5,100 operating across the region in Mali, Niger, Chad, Burkina Faso, and Mauritania.



Source: [Atalayar](#)

France was initially hailed as a liberator and managed to mobilize other partners such as the UN (MINUSMA), and the EU (Takuba Task Force – European military force under French Command to assist the Malian Armed Forces, EUTM, and EUCAP Sahel). The EU, which adopted its first strategy for the Sahel in 2011, including aspects such as governance, security, diplomacy and the rule of law, was also able to engage with the G5 Sahel in 2015. This was a regional coordination group established by Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and



Chad, aimed at enhancing security and development.

But over time, with vague goals and covering a plethora of local and transnational issues, France was unable to depart from *Françafrique* (the French sphere of influence over former Belgian and French colonies in sub-Saharan Africa) and recognise social and religious changes in the region. Based on these points and rising nationalism, Paris has been accused of perpetuating neo-colonial patterns of dependency, a view supported by Russian disinformation campaigns, helping Moscow gain a competitive advantage over an established European power. Relatedly, the French government has been tainted by association with regimes that have been unable to guard against rising insecurity and corruption. Indeed, Mali experienced military takeovers (coups) in 2012, 2020, 2021 and 2023. After the 2021 coup, Takuba was terminated and in May 2022 Mali left G5 Sahel. Since 2013, there have been [thousands of military casualties and 2.5 million people have been displaced in the region](#). More recently, since the war in Ukraine and the trend towards global fragmentation, French policymakers have doubled down on European defence versus unproductive counterterrorism operations in the Sahel.



Source: [MEI](#)

By August 2022, after falling out with the new military government in Mali and its use of Russian mercenaries, all 2,400 French forces had completed their departure from Mali. This

seems to have been the final straw, and on 9 November 2022, French President Emmanuel Macron [announced the end of his country's almost decade-long anti-jihadist operation in the Sahel](#). It was followed in January 2023 with a [request from the military junta in Burkina Faso](#) that France withdraw the remaining 400 troops from the country within a month, thereby ending a military agreement that allowed French troops to fight insurgents on Burkina Faso territory. Then, a military-led coup in Niger in July 2023 led to popular protests and [calls for the 1,500 French troops stationed there to leave](#), followed by the expulsion of the French ambassador after he refused to meet with the new military-installed foreign minister.

Relations between Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) established in 1975 with the help of these states, were also affected following the bloc's announcement urging Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger to return to democratic rule. In December 2023, [after years of fraught relations between MINUSMA and the Malian government over Malian armed forces' attacks against civilians](#), the Malian government cancelled MINUSMA's mandate renewal and ordered the immediate departure of the UN mission. In December 2023, Niger and Burkina Faso withdrew from G5 Sahel. In January 2024, all three states announced their departure from ECOWAS, accusing it of being influenced by external powers and having failed to tackle jihadist violence in their countries. The emerging dynamic appears to be one of military coups, turning to Russian mercenaries for security assistance, shifting rules of military engagement, and therefore growing instability and human rights concerns.

Russia's Wagner Group and New Africa Corps

As a mercenary group, with operations in Syria and various African countries, including



Algeria, Libya, Mali, Sudan, Burkina Faso, Eritrea, Cameroon, and the Central African Republic, the Russian-funded private military company Wagner established a foothold in Africa in 2015 through a [primarily economic modus operandi: obtain access to mining contracts and valuable resources to help counter Western sanctions, along with some military access and attempt to undermine U.S. leadership](#). Indeed, it has been claimed that the motivation behind videoed tirades by the then head of the Wagner Group, Yevgeny Prigozhin, against Russia's war effort including references to a lack of weaponry and medical attention in Ukraine, was an attempt to get the group redeployed to Africa. The war in Ukraine has had a demonstrable effect on Wagner's expeditionary operations, with [more than 30,000 of its rank and file, mostly from Russian prisons, killed in Ukraine](#). Prigozhin was subsequently killed in a plane crash in August 2023 shortly after attempting to march on Moscow in [retaliation for a suspected Russian Defense Ministry attack on a Wagner camp in Ukraine](#).

First under Prigozhin, and now under a new Kremlin-controlled [Africa Corps](#) which was founded by Dmitry Utkin (who also died in the crash that killed Prigozhin), Russian activities in Africa continue to reflect the prerogatives of local military "strongmen." The [Africa Corps, which uses the same name \(Afrika Korps\) that Adolf Hitler gave to his expeditionary force](#), looks to be an attempt to remove some of the negative associations the Wagner Group has among African leaders, especially in terms of its unbridled autonomy and public disagreements with the Russian Ministry of Defense and by extension, President Putin. This group was established after Russian Deputy Defence Minister Yunus-bek Yevkurov visited Benghazi, Libya, [where he met with Marshal Khalifa Haftar](#), the defacto leader of Cyrenaica, Libya's eastern province.

Russian influence in the Sahel looks set to expand to levels not seen since the Cold War, raising further questions about the global consequences of Russia-NATO tensions, especially Russia's limited aims, mostly economic ties and countering western influence, and power projection into the Global South. As Leonid Nersisyan, a defense analyst, notes: "the best Russian officers and contractors have been deployed to Ukraine, while less capable and wounded personnel, as well as conscripts, are filling up their places in foreign bases." A lack of training and discipline may have helped Wagner Group ramp up fighters in the region thereby increasing its footprint in states receptive to its *modus operandi*, but it has also led to a rise in reported human rights abuses.



Source: [Politico](#)

[According to US non-profit group, The Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project \(ACLED\)](#), attacks against civilians in Mali increased by 38 percent year on year to September 2023, led by Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (a violent jihadist organization created by the merger of Ansar Dine, the Macina Liberation Front, Al-Mourabitoun, and the Saharan branch of Al-Qaeda) which was responsible for 180 attacks. This was followed by the Malian state and the Wagner Group (160 events), and Daesh (IS Sahel) (almost 90 events). [A 2022 report by Sahelian civil society](#) estimated that an average of 8 civilians are



killed every day in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso, equating to almost 3,000 per year. That figure is bound to have increased in 2023 and will continue even more so in 2024 without the restraining influence of UN peacekeeping forces in operation. In February 2023 before his visit to the region, President Macron called the Wagner Group “[life insurance of failing regimes.](#)” In March 2023, the U.S. Secretary of State was quoted as saying: “[We’ve seen countries find themselves weaker, poorer, more insecure, less independent as a result of their association with Wagner.](#)” This has led the U.S. to share actionable intelligence with Chad, Rwanda, Burkina Faso, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and the Central African Republic, in a bid to offset some of Wagner’s attraction and possibly boost the effectiveness of state responses to national security threats. In the meantime newly formed arrangements of mercenaries and volunteers, [expected to reach 20,000 men](#), although more likely to number 5,000-7,000, [with the backing of the Russian Ministry of Defense and the Foreign Intelligence Service](#), may sustain the military regimes in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso. But their unrestrained battles against violent jihadist operations and potential to expand to securitize other aspects of each national political economy could be equally consequential. Without alternative forms of peacekeeping and more development aid, Russian influence is likely to grow.



Source: [Politico](#)

Mediation

In light of failed multilateral attempts to effect positive change in the Sahel, local efforts such as Algeria’s lead on mediation in Niger are logical, as is its [coordination with ECOWAS and the U.S.](#) Algeria shares a common border with Niger and Mali, and therefore has a deep interest in their stability. Yet, since 1962, Algeria has had a policy of non-intervention in the affairs of other states. This helped the North African country play a leading role in negotiating the release of U.S. hostages from Iran in 1981 and could be useful again. Despite a high-level dialogue on regional and international issues such as the situation in the Sahel, both Algeria and the U.S. have agreed to disagree on the issue of the Western Sahara. While this does not necessarily represent a problem, it does mask underlying discontent, as was shown when [Algeria introduced sanctions against the UAE for its support of Morocco over the Western Sahara](#). This unresolved issue, therefore, could undermine joint diplomatic efforts in a theatre vital to Algerian national security and U.S. international security interests. The tension over the Western Sahara was brought about by President Trump’s proclamation recognizing the Western Sahara as part of Morocco in December 2020, the same month Morocco agreed to normalize relations with Israel.

Unable to address “[armed nomadism](#)” after the Algiers Agreement in 2006 and the “Algiers Process” of 2015, when Algeria worked closely with France and the UN Mission in Mali to push the Coordination of Movements for Azawad (CMA) into a deal, there now appears to be less international cohesion around Algerian mediation. Disarmament, Demobilisation, and Reintegration (DDR) has not been followed by addressing other root causes of violence in Mali. Given the fact that the [Tuareg took control of Bamba from the army and killed 80 soldiers in October 2023](#) and the military junta



ending the 2015 peace deal with the Tuareg in [January 2024 with immediate effect](#), a diplomatic solution is urgent. Nevertheless, foreign interference could easily stoke already high levels of community distrust and exacerbate weaknesses in the Malian state.



Source: [Atalayar](#)

Northern Mali is particularly susceptible to transnational violent Islamist influences, and whilst sub-regional cooperation between Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso could be useful, the current premise of focusing exclusively on regime survival looks to be anything but. The growth of ungoverned spaces in Mali and Niger continues to be a threat to regional and international security. At the forefront of filling the vacuum could be the AU, the EU, and the UN. Yet, evidence suggests that where countries choose Wagner, [such as the Central African Republic](#), the EU will stop its training programmes. Even Algeria has not been immune to Wagner and [Russian military visits](#), since Algerian and Libyan ports are prerequisites for Russia to extend supply lines down to the Sahel. Russia is also a big arms supplier to Algeria. Meanwhile, violent Islamist groups such as IS Sahel have continued to expand their operations. Given the nature of the threat and the timing, coming amid other urgent threats such as wars in Ukraine and Gaza, the Biden administration is unlikely to open up a new front in the Sahel. Instead, the U.S. has relied on drones and a humanitarian aid and

resilience program, spending about [\\$233 million in the Sahel in 2023](#).

The Arab Gulf States

Whilst the Arab Gulf states are well placed to address some of the root causes of insecurity in the Sahel, such as poverty, development, and connectivity, in other areas such as governance and security sector reforms the picture becomes less clear. The Arab Gulf states could engage in more targeted migrant labor practices from the region to help restore a balance in Sahelian national economies. [Kuwait is already extending loans](#) to each of what were the G5 Sahel countries, and Saudi Arabia has been working with the French Development Agency since 2020 on a [EUR 200 million development initiative](#). With economic diversification, Middle East tensions, post-conflict planning in Gaza, and maritime insecurity to worry about, it is not clear what more the Arab Gulf states could do in the Sahel.

For some Arab Gulf states, such as the UAE, which are aligned with Morocco, have been involved in Libya and Sudan, and have had some of their [commercial entities tied to Wagner in Africa](#) such as Industrial Resources General Trading and Kratol Aviation, projecting influence into the Sahel might be considered divisive. It would certainly run contrary to the de-escalatory phase the Arab Gulf states are now operationalising in pursuit of domestic imperatives. Within the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS, the [UAE has called for maximum pressure to stymie the expanding threat landscape of IS Sahel in the Sahel and West African region](#). The Sawab Center, a think tank dedicated to combatting terrorism and extremism based on the misuse of religion, set up as a collaboration between the UAE and the U.S., could be instrumental in continuing to draw attention to regional and international security risks associated with the Sahel. These include the multifaceted crime-terror nexus in



the region, such as AQIM hostage-taking and taxation activities, as well as human smuggling by AQIM affiliated groups leveraging IS Sahel's focus on establishing drug routes. Further reports may spark fresh assessments in the West about the form and modalities of further engagement. The UAE and other tribal nations across the Gulf remain good illustrations of unity under national development plans which perhaps Sahelian states can learn from, especially in their relations with the Tuaregs.

The leaders at the November 2023 Saudi Arabian–African Summit [vowed to continue cooperation in countering terrorism](#). But with diverse foreign policy agendas among the members of the main summits: the Saudi Arabian–African Summit, the U.S.–Africa Summit, the Forum in China–Africa Cooperation, and the Russia–Africa Summit, working coherently on advancing diplomacy, DDR, and democratic transition in the Sahel remains extremely unlikely.

Formulating a Renewed International Response

Given the rise of IS Sahel [and Al Qaeda affiliated groups in the tri-border area between Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso](#), a new international campaign of counterterrorism and stabilisation activities conducted by [the Global Coalition Against IS Sahel with partners such as the UN Development Program and the Funding Facility for Stabilization](#) might be a more effective counter-insurgency grouping and more politically expedient for all concerned. However, external actor military and aid budgetary constraints, the demise of MINUSMA, and the sovereign policies of Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso look set to thwart coordinated international action until the spillover effects threaten larger swaths of the region and European security. At that point, with groups such as IS Sahel and Al Qaeda

acquiring greater strategic depth and flexibility, it will likely be much harder to stymie their growth and have longer-term impacts on human security and economic development.

Existing frameworks such as the UN Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) could be utilized and extended (in terms of time and from a political mission into a security mission) to address both the unresolved rivalry between east and west Libya (including the national security interests of neighbouring states such as Egypt and by extension, Arab Gulf states such as Saudi Arabia and the UAE), egregious breaches of a UN arms embargo, and the crime–terror nexus in the Sahel that has thrived in a security vacuum with branches creeping north. A renewed anti-IS coalition could target the most egregious forms of insecurity in the tri-border area, supported by a raft of economic measures currently led by the EU through the [European Peace Facility](#) (which has been redirected to Ukraine but could swing back to focus on the Sahel), some of the Arab Gulf states, and with greater buy-in from Algeria and Libya. European states should lobby the U.S. to support such a shift. Ultimately, it will be up to the Sahelian military regimes to govern and be a net contributor to security or face further violence in attempts to reset the status quo.

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