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POLICY BRIEF

ALIGNED IN THE SAND: HOW EUROPEANS CAN HELP STABILISE THE SAHEL

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October 2024

SUMMARY

- A decade of military, humanitarian, and developmental European interventions in the Sahelian states of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger have failed comprehensively. Coups have swept the region. Burkina Faso is close to complete collapse.
- Europe thus faces three openly antagonistic military juntas on its southern flank, which are cutting deals with rival outside powers like Russia.
- The combination of past failure, disinformation campaigns, and the wars in Gaza and Ukraine have scattered European states' approaches in all directions. Some have walked away from the Sahel completely. Others have stayed but resisted cooperation with the Sahelian juntas. A few have sought to remain engaged.
- European governments should stay involved in the Sahel wherever possible. The region is part of Europe's neighbourhood; rival outside powers have no qualms about mass human-rights abuses; and further disengagement will only open up new inroads for malign actors.
- For European governments, this means frankly acknowledging past failures in the Sahel, gathering behind a new strategy for engagement, and supporting Gulf of Guinea states. A particular focus should be funding anti-disinformation policies.

The abandoned laboratory

European governments have largely turned away from events on their southern flank in the Sahel region. But hundreds of shaky videos filmed on mobile phones bear witness to the horrors that continue to unfold there.

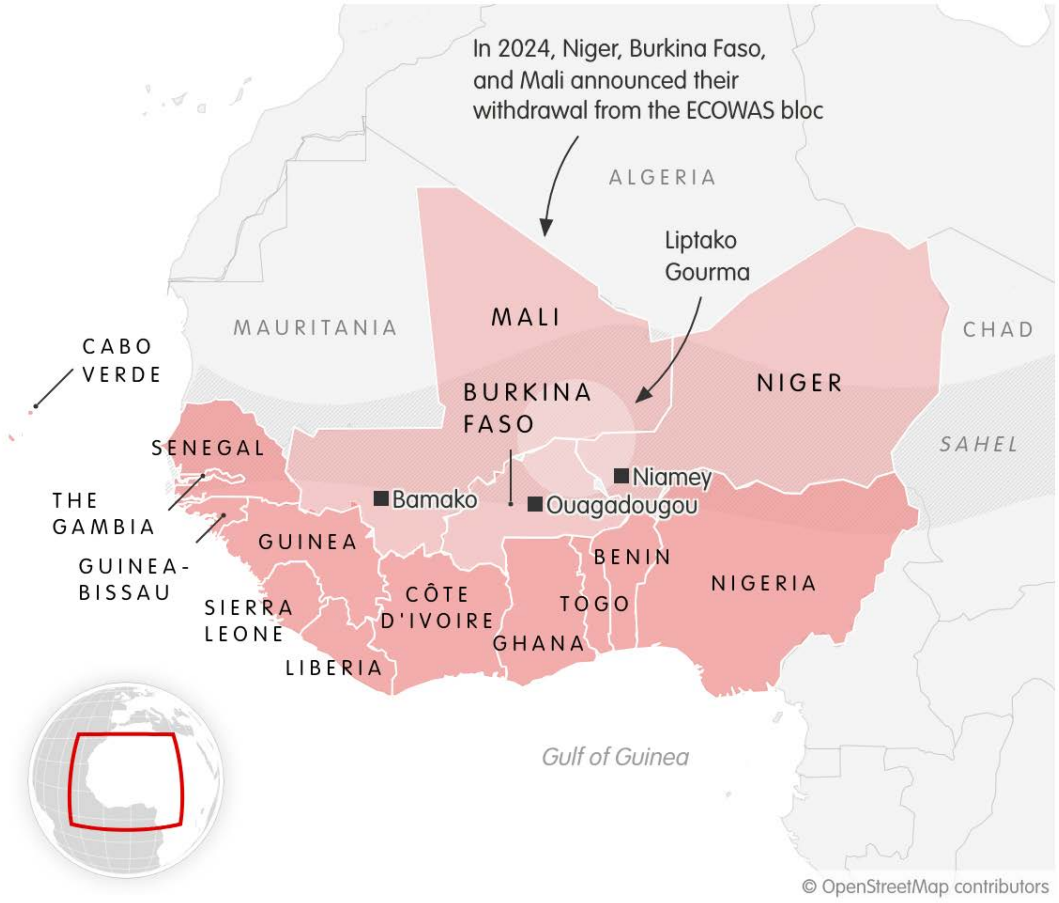
Dozens of dead Sahelian troops are strewn across a dusty road. The corpses of locals accused of helping the enemy are piled up in a village. Soldiers, clearly identifiable by their uniforms, desecrate and cannibalise bodies. Jihadists gloat over hundreds of captured automatic rifles, armed vehicles, and rocket-propelled grenades. And a Burkinabe writer — sent to the frontline as punishment for daring to criticise the new junta — cradles an aged Kalashnikov he does not know how to use.

Back in February 2013, the Sahel's future seemed brighter. France's President François Hollande paraded giddily through the liberated streets of the northern Malian town of Timbuktu. The initial phase of France's Operation Serval had been an extraordinary success. The militants seemed to have been routed from most of the country's north. Music banned under the occupation of the jihadist Ansar al-Din group once again rang through the medieval streets.

The region would soon be described among European experts as a "laboratory for experimentation" in coordinated foreign and security policy. Almost every European Union member state, from Germany and Estonia to Sweden and the United Kingdom (then still a member), would end up throwing its weight behind the French-led effort to prop up Sahelian governments against a host of armed groups along the southern fringes of the Sahara.

But today, the situation is bleak. A decade of military, humanitarian, and developmental interventions from European and other actors in the Sahel failed comprehensively to stop the violence from spreading. What was initially perceived as a straightforward fight against fundamentalists became entangled in complex violence driven by ethnic tensions, poverty, and local conflicts. Many governments were risk-averse and barely let their soldiers out of bases. Europe was tested and was found wanting. The insecurity has spread out from northern Mali into the Liptako Gourma tri-border area and into neighbouring Burkina Faso and Niger, killing tens of thousands and displacing millions.

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS)



Source: ecowas.int
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A series of military coups d'état from 2020 to 2023 — first in Mali, then in Burkina Faso, and finally in Niger — swept aside old political elites who were seen, often justifiably, as ineffective and corrupt. A new cadre of rulers have taken power: Colonel Assimi Goita in Mali, Captain Ibrahim Traoré in Burkina Faso, and General Abdourahamane Tchiani in Niger.

The three juntas turned on France, ousted governments' main security guarantor, expelling its forces from the central Sahelian states. Their states have become a quintessential example of the new multipolar world. China, Iran, Morocco, Nicaragua, Russia, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, and Venezuela, and potentially even North Korea are all stepping in to use the crisis to their advantage.[1] They come with a whole mishmash of objectives. These include making fast cash from minerals and arms sales, expanding their own geopolitical sway, and weaponising migration through the Sahel against Europe. But most of these new players offer little more than shoddy arms, mercenaries, bot farms, and exploitative mining deals.

Meanwhile jihadism stalks the region. The juntas in Bamako, Ouagadougou, and Niamey claim that they are winning the fight against the terrorist groups Jama'a Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) and Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), and that they are reclaiming their nations' sovereignty. But in reality they are at best stuck, and at worst gradually losing the fight. At least one of these states, Burkina Faso, is perilously close to complete collapse. Ghana, the only Gulf of Guinea coastal state not attacked by jihadist groups so far, could soon be dragged into the conflict.

This policy brief focuses on European, and more specifically EU, policy towards Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. It also considers the Gulf of Guinea states, particularly Ghana. Drawing on research in the Sahel and in European capitals, it explains how — faced with adversarial juntas, well-funded disinformation campaigns, and competing foreign policy priorities — EU and other European states have scattered in all directions. Some governments have walked away entirely. Some have remained, but limited their engagement. Others have tried to stay active in pursuit of their interests in the region. But an alarmingly prominent trend among European policymakers is denial about their failures, combined with a tendency to lecture the new Sahelian leaders about democracy while supporting autocrats elsewhere in Africa.

The central assertions of this brief are that European governments should acknowledge those failures, simplify their often contradictory responses to the crisis — and accept that engagement, however ugly, is their only hope of advancing their strategic priority of a stable Sahel region. In other words: they should remain involved wherever possible, fixing the previous failings of their approach rather than walking away.

This paper argues that rather than closing embassies or slashing development and humanitarian spending (unless forced to by expulsion), European states should stay and seek to stabilise the crisis, stay abreast of events, counterbalance hostile powers, and quietly support incremental civic and democratic advances. They should back normalised relations between the juntas and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), and boost their support for Gulf of Guinea states vital to stabilising the region.

But these actions will amount to little if Europe does not change one particular thing: its anti-disinformation strategy. There is a desperate need for the EU and its member states to overhaul toothless policies that have left their Sahel strategy – if such a strategy still exists — at the mercy of well-funded propaganda campaigns from the likes of China, Russia, and certain countries in Latin America. [2] So this paper emphatically advocates serious investments in counter-measures that would pay for themselves many times over.

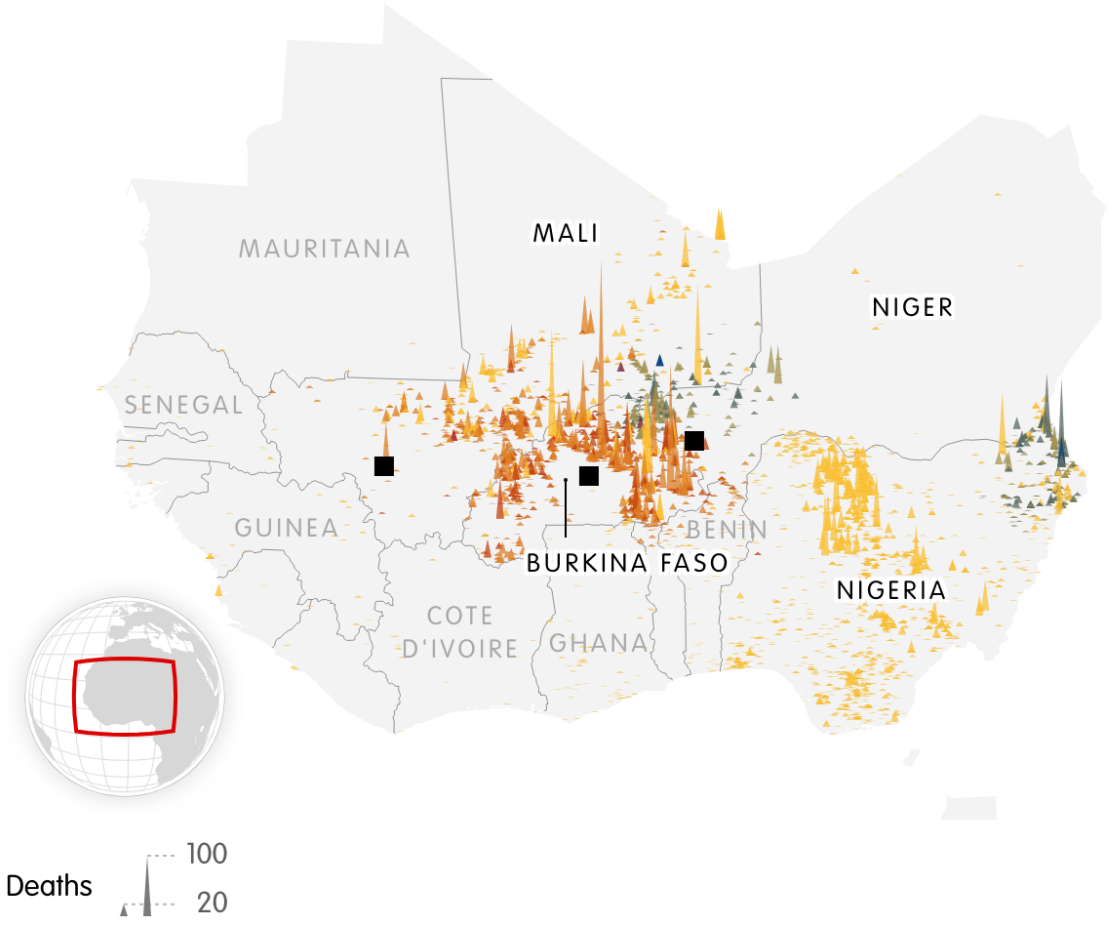
A Sahelian sitrep

After more than a decade of a bloody jihadist conflict, the crisis in the Sahel is about to become much worse. The three military juntas led by Goïta in Mali, Traoré in Burkina Faso, and Tchiani in Niger – who came to power in coups in 2021, 2022, and 2023 respectively – are failing to stem the tide of violence and lawlessness hollowing out their states.

Amid growing insecurity and their weakening territorial grip, the three regimes have concentrated most of their efforts on safeguarding their capital cities, where power is ultimately maintained or lost. In doing so they have essentially abandoned the effort to reclaim and stabilise remote rural areas, which are heavily contested by JNIM and ISGS. In some cases, villages have fallen entirely under the administration of these groups, which now collect taxes on cattle and harvests there.

Violent incidents in western Africa, September 2023 - September 2024

Involving JNIM (Al-Qaeda-aligned jihadists) Islamic State militias, state forces, and others



Source: ACLED
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Meanwhile violence is spreading. The above map shows the explosion of attacks across the central Sahelian states, as well as the slow creep of violent incidents and jihadist operations towards coastal states on the Gulf of Guinea.

Mali: The Kremlin's Sahelian hub

Over three years on from Goita's coup in Mali, his government in Bamako has a relatively effective administrative apparatus and is probably the most stable of the three Sahelian juntas. It accomplished some military successes around the northern town of Kidal in 2023, bolstering morale and marking a personal achievement for Goita.

But these were symbolic and self-defeating. The Malian Armed Forces (*Forces Armées Maliennes*, FAMA) and their Russian Africa Corps allies are now overstretched as they try to maintain a presence in the centre, north, and north-east of the country. They are fighting against JNIM, ISGS, and the rebel Permanent Strategic Framework (*Cadre stratégique permanent*, CSP), an alliance of predominantly Tuareg groups.[3] The coming months will likely bring increased coordination between ethnic Tuareg rebels from the CSP and JNIM and more attacks in the centre of the country.

Mali is Moscow's main outpost in the Sahel. Its Africa Corps, which includes the African sections of the Wagner Group private military company, has about 1,000-2,000 men in the country, working mainly under the control of FAMA. The country is rich in valuable mineral resources, particularly gold. By establishing control over these resources, Russia has secured a substantial financial asset, giving it a buffer against international sanctions.

Moscow's influence could soon wane. Russian forces in the Sahel are overstretched and losing credibility by the day. Take two recent events. First, in late July, a desert attack by the Tuareg rebel groups and JNIM (allegedly with the support of Ukrainian intelligence) reportedly killed 84 Africa Corps fighters and dozens of Malian soldiers at Tinzaouaten on the Mali-Algeria border. In response, Mali was reduced to furiously shooting people with drones, seemingly at random. An August airstrike reportedly killed at least 21 civilians, including 11 children. Secondly, in mid-September, JNIM launched an ambitious attack on the airport in Bamako, the capital, reportedly killing dozens. If Mali's capital is vulnerable, so are the Burkinabe and Nigerien ones, both now almost encircled by jihadists.

Russia may offer bot farms, mercenaries, weapons, military training, and access to financial schemes designed to counter sanctions, but after two years of involvement in Mali its limited capacity to change anything fundamentally on the ground is painfully apparent. Moscow was strategic and calculated when it first engaged in the Sahel, but has overextended itself militarily after bouts of opportunistic expansion, while also fighting its full-scale war on Ukraine. It does not have the financial heft or tools necessary to offer much more than regime security to Goita and his cadre in Bamako.

Goita has reportedly considered recruiting mercenaries from Sadat, a private military firm close to the Turkish government. It is unclear whether a deal has been reached, but its objective would probably be to counterbalance Sadio Camara, his powerful defence minister and potential rival. Camara is the critical interlocutor for Africa Corps in the country. Regardless of whether a deal is struck with Sadat, the Malian junta will likely keep looking for new potential security partners.

Other opportunities for European engagement are also available. Several civil society activists interviewed told the author that the Malian government is genuinely concerned about its perceived legitimacy. It does not want openly combative protests or other direct criticisms of its authority in the public sphere, but it listens to and addresses concerns about military operations and governance from peacekeeping NGOs when they are raised cautiously. Several European governments have maintained inroads into the lower levels of government and have strong access to civil society or peace-building groups. These inroads are promising and should be maintained.

Burkina Faso: A state on the brink

Burkina Faso is the most fragile of the three Sahelian states. Its economy is crisis. And while the government claims to control 69 per cent of the country's territory, [4] more than 60 per cent remains outside its control, with JNIM and ISGS controlling about 40 and 10 per cent respectively. One of the deadliest attacks by JNIM occurred in Barsalogho, some 145 kilometres north of the capital, on 24 August 2024. Initial reports from local media indicated that nearly 400 people were killed as they tried to dig defensive trenches, but a recent French security assessment put the number as high as 600 dead, making it one of the deadliest attacks in all of Africa in decades. The Burkinabe government has not yet acknowledged this blatant failure of its authority.

After several potential coup attempts, Captain Traoré is cracking down on dissent and diverting as much weaponry as possible from the regular army to the elite Rapid Intervention Battalions (*Bataillon d'Intervention Rapide*, BIR), which rights groups have implicated in multiple grave abuses against civilians.[5] Multiple sources and the author's reporting indicate that torture chambers are in operation around Ouagadougou, the capital. Critics of the government have been stopped in midday traffic by security forces and carted off to fight on the frontline[6].

The broad European response to the Traoré junta after it seized power in September 2022, in the second of Burkina Faso's two coups that year, was initially more realist. EU states offered to provide military support to Ouagadougou on the condition that the junta arm only the professional military and not militiamen from the Volunteers for the Defence of the Homeland (*Volontaires pour la défense de la patrie*, VDP), a self-defence group. This attempt failed, and EU states withdrew their support. Now VDP groups working in concert with the professional armed forces have been implicated in a host of egregious abuses.

The VDP militiamen undergo some basic military training, but lack any serious instruction in human rights and the laws of war. Many units end up pursuing local grudges against ethnic minorities. The militiamen do not seem to discriminate between children, adults, and combatants during attacks. Public reports from NGOs and journalists detailing horrific abuses, such as soldiers crushing children's heads with stones, likely capture only a small fraction of the horrors. In turn, the spiral of violence is flooding the jihadists' ranks with eager recruits.

At the same time, JNIM and ISGS are pouring profits from illegal gold mining and smuggling into arms purchases, meaning they often have much better equipment than the Burkinabe army, with its hand-held drones.[7] The force imbalance has led to a catastrophic casualty rate in the Burkinabe armed forces, with around one third dead or injured since the beginning of the war and high rates of post-traumatic stress disorder. The military was privately recording about 500 deaths and casualties per week earlier this year and is currently burying bodies sporadically and in smaller numbers to avoid large gatherings of mourners.[8]

International observers estimate Russia to have anywhere from about one hundred to a few hundred military advisers in the country running a slick propaganda operation, protecting Traoré, and working on armament imports. In late August the French media reported that some of the Russian "Bear Brigade" shielding Traoré would be returning home to fight against Ukraine's incursion into the Kursk region of Russia. A contingent will stay behind in Ouagadougou to protect the regime. The brigade has recently hired some African

mercenaries; possibly from Sudan or Mali, though that remains (seemingly deliberately) unclear.

The regime appears to be on the brink of collapse. There is a noticeable disconnect between its military strategy and its execution on the ground. Sources inside the junta and local media reports indicate that during attacks, its military forces often lack commitment. Troops sometimes abandon weapons shortly after first contact. This pattern reflects a deeper issue within the army: a crisis of morale and strategic direction symptomatic of a lack of internal cohesion and leadership.

Several military and government sources in the Gulf of Guinea claim that only last-minute Russian and Iranian arms shipments prevented a complete collapse in Ouagadougou in early 2024. These reportedly provided a vital boost to the regime's standing within the military at a critical moment. The author could not confirm these claims, but it appears that the Burkinabe regime has also reached out to Venezuela, Nicaragua, and North Korea. [9] "Their house is on fire. They don't care if the hand coming down from the sky is the hand of God or the hand of the devil; they want to save their people," one West African official said. [10]

"We are deeply worried about a complete collapse of Burkina Faso," one Western official added. That eventuality would open up a space the size of the UK in the heart of west Africa for all manner of armed groups, with insecurity bursting out into six neighbouring countries. A collapse would likely put significant pressure on Europe's most important democratic partners in the region, Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana.

All of which makes Burkina Faso the hardest country of the Sahelian trio with which to engage. Traoré has built his regime on extreme anti-Western rhetoric. Moreover, the sheer scale of the government-backed human rights abuses makes it hard for many European diplomats to envisage cooperation with the core of his regime. As one put it to the author: "We cannot reward them for this slaughter."

Niger: The last pro-Western bastion falls

General Tchiani's junta in Niger is the youngest of the Sahelian three, having come to power in July 2023 by ousting President Mohamed Bazoum's pro-Western government in a palace coup. Today it is struggling to face down a wave of attacks from ISGS and, to a lesser extent, JNIM. These groups have effectively encircled the capital, Niamey, making sporadic attacks on the city. The junta is also facing two loyalist rebel groups, the Patriotic Liberation Front and the Patriotic Front for Justice, that have already attacked an oil pipeline and claim to fight for the liberation

and reinstatement of Bazoum.

Media reports and interviews with diplomats indicate that Tchiani is paranoid, often irrational, and rarely leaves his barricaded presidential palace. [11] The reported recent influx of Turkish Sadat and Russian mercenaries is unlikely to resolve the security crisis, especially given the significant loss of military capability with the expulsion of most European and US forces over the last year. The conflict looks set to worsen around the Tillaberi region in western Niger.

The aftermath of the 2023 coup in Niger has been a litany of diplomatic miscalculation both from regional powers and from the Europeans. Led by Nigeria under President Bola Ahmed Tinubu, ECOWAS threatened to intervene to restore Bazoum, an unserious proposition that would have caused a humanitarian catastrophe. "I was there when all the ECOWAS generals met in Ghana after the coup in Niger. Everyone knew right from the outset an invasion was never going to happen. None of the soldiers were going to go to war against their brothers across the border," one west African analyst said. [12]

The empty threat almost singlehandedly entrenched the Nigerien junta's position and significantly weakened Tinubu's hand and international reputation. Since then, ECOWAS has softened its position, relenting on all sanctions in February 2024 because of "humanitarian reasons" and in a bid to prevent Niger as well as Mali and Burkina Faso from breaking away from the organisation (discussed further in the next section of this brief).

Europe's response to the coup has been no less confusing. Immediately afterwards, the EU and most of its members followed the French and ECOWAS line: zero-tolerance for the putschists. Several member states supported the ECOWAS threat of intervention, arguing that the union should take a stand against the assault on democracy. The union stopped all financial support and security cooperation with Niamey. In response, the junta froze a controversial EU-backed law to curb northbound migration and withdrew diplomatic immunity from an EU capacity-building mission in the country.

But soon, Europe's position fractured. France and the European External Action Service (EEAS) — furious at the treatment of their ally Bazoum, EU staff, and French citizens — pushed for a hardline approach. Then Germany's defence minister Boris Pistorius visited Niamey and tried to lobby for the continuation of a small military logistics hub. Meanwhile, Italy pushed for a realpolitik-based engagement with the junta on security and migration issues. Then later, in July 2024, Germany finally withdrew its soldiers from Niger after their diplomatic immunity was not renewed. But as ECOWAS opens up to the junta – and external powers like Russia seek advantage from European disengagement – Europe's caution and divisions look like an ever-starker weakness.

Bazoum was widely liked and admired in Brussels and Berlin. His continued detention and trial for treason, for which he may face the death penalty, is a significant obstacle and may soon make any cooperation untenable for several EU member states. [13] Those governments do not want to be seen to abandon their allies, especially democratic ones, or to back down so easily. Likewise, it is domestically difficult for the Nigerien junta to make concessions. Like the other juntas, it has backed itself into a corner with its harsh rhetoric. But as ECOWAS opens up to it – and external powers like Russia seek advantage from European disengagement – the EU's alienation from and divisions over Niger look like an ever-starker weakness.

The Alliance of Sahelian states and "Sahel-exit"

The empty threat to invade Niger is now widely seen as a diplomatic disaster in many European and ECOWAS capitals. It set the three Sahelian states on the path to establishing a mutual military defence pact in September 2023, then to form the new Alliance of Sahelian States (*Alliance des États du Sahel*, AES) confederation in July 2024, and to threaten to withdraw from ECOWAS by January 2025.

The creation of the AES is not a bad thing in itself. Compare it with the G5 Sahel, established in 2014, that saw five regional states (the Sahel trio plus Chad and Mauritania) agree to let their militaries transcend each other's borders by up to 100 kilometres to pursue armed groups. Despite a strong initiating push from France and substantial Western funding, the lack of intelligence sharing and limited military capacity among the G5 meant it never took off . As a homegrown initiative, the AES could be a more effective joint measure.

It could. But that does not mean it will. The underlying problems of inadequate military resources and intelligence sharing are still stark. And whether AES cooperation will be used against legitimate militant targets is another matter: drones loaned from Burkina Faso to Mali under the alliance's banner were probably used in indiscriminate air strikes against Tuareg rebel groups in August 2024 that killed at least 21 civilians, including 11 children, according to one Western diplomat. So some equivocation on this is understandable.

By contrast the threat of the three Sahelian states leaving ECOWAS, or a "Sahel-exit", which has emerged in parallel with the creation of the AES, spells disaster. The rupture would likely exacerbate immigration challenges, disrupt economic exchanges between the 3 departing states and the remaining 12 members of the bloc, and potentially ignite yet more xenophobic tensions across the region. It would weaken the ability of stronger, coastal ECOWAS states to

respond to the Sahel crisis, open more space for powers like Russia and Iran, and diminish diplomatic inroads for Europeans to encourage moderation. European governments would do well to support the quiet but vital efforts being made by ECOWAS officials and individual member states like Togo to lower tensions and bring the Sahelian governments back into the fold.

Gulf of Guinea

Since the expulsion or withdrawal of most Western forces from all three Sahelian states, Western governments have put a new emphasis on supporting the Gulf of Guinea states as sources of stability. The UK and the United States have sought to cooperate more with Ghana's forces to bolster their defences, while the EU's efforts have largely focused on France's two key West African partners: Côte d'Ivoire and Benin.

During 2023 and 2024, the European Peace Facility (EPF) donated some €33m of military aid to Ghana, some €40m of lethal and non-lethal equipment to Benin, and €15m of aid to Côte d'Ivoire. A potential €10m of support is also earmarked for Togo. This direct military aid comes on top of tens of millions of euros of support for maritime security in the coastal states and the plethora of development programmes encompassed by the EU's Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument, its main tool for external financing. The bloc has also launched an EU Security and Defence Initiative supporting the Gulf of Guinea states, which includes the deployment of four civilian security advisers and two military advisers to the region. And it has invested diplomatic and financial support in the Accra Initiative, which was formed in 2017 to help coordinate military action and prevent the spillover of terrorism from the Sahel to the Gulf of Guinea.

The current aid is a good start, as is the decision finally to allow lethal military equipment to countries facing down hostile armed groups across their borders. But much more is needed to make a tangible impact. And diplomatic sensitivities abound. The AES governments perceive both Benin and Côte d'Ivoire as strongholds of French influence that endanger their military rule. Energy, military, and political disputes between those two essential partners and the Sahel three run deep. And while the Accra Initiative provides a helpful platform for countries to meet occasionally, Western officials consider the idea of operationalising it fanciful. The coastal states desperately need to share intelligence and partake in coordinated military action so insurgents cannot flit across borders into safety, but the participating governments do not trust each other enough to make this work.

Ghana: A new front line

A stable and significant European partner in the region, Ghana is the only Gulf of Guinea country that neither JNIM nor ISGS has attacked yet. But there is a notable risk that fighting will spread there soon. The jihadist groups are obtaining most of the equipment they need from Gulf of Guinea ports with the help of corrupt officials or criminal networks. The armed groups in Burkina Faso already have rear operating bases on the Ghanaian side of the 540 kilometre-long border. There they have some influence over marginalised communities in Ghana's poorer north, including the Fulani minority, alienated by discriminatory rhetoric from leaders in Accra.

Ghana has been preparing for combat spillover from Burkina Faso for several years. In 2020, the government launched Operation Conquered Fist, an annual military exercise in its northern areas. For now, the Ghanaian armed forces seem be maintaining an uneasy peace with the jihadists, arresting suspects without bloodshed and deporting them back to Burkina Faso. Senior officials in Accra fear that it is only a matter of time until people are killed and tit-for-tat attacks spiral, pulling Ghana into the war. "Honestly, I do not know how we have not been attacked yet," said one.

After years of military cooperation with the UK and the US, Ghana has one of the most professional militaries in the region. However, it is still under-prepared and under-equipped for the challenge ahead. For example, the government has tried to build 17 forts along the northern border with Burkina Faso but only managed two before money ran out and the international contractor gave up.[14] Members of the Ghanaian armed forces say they do not have enough equipment or drones to counter the jihadist groups, and the government is too financially constrained to purchase them in either the quality or quantity required.

Ghanaian civilian and military officials privately express deep frustration about the complexity of purchasing or receiving arms and munitions from EU member states. Alongside past failures in the Sahel (such as German soldiers infamously training Malian soldiers with sticks), this has severely damaged Europe's reputation across the region. "No wonder the Sahelian countries are turning to Russia. You call Moscow up, and by the time you finish, the stuff is already being loaded onto a plane," one Ghanian official recently explained to the author. "You don't need to worry about paperwork."

One case that Ghanaian officials cite is the EU €20m donation of more than 100 military vehicles in October 2023 through the European Peace Facility. The bloc initially seized the shipment of military vehicles en route to Libya and later gifted them to Ghana. On the

surface, it seemed like a strong initiative. But in reality, most of the vehicles were of little use to the Ghanaian military, as they were a mixed collection of different models and the EU offered no maintenance agreement. Soldiers felt they could only use them for parades. [15]

This fits into a general line of complaint that can be heard across west African capitals: the West donates billions of dollars to Ukraine to defend itself and sells billions of dollars of arms to Saudi Arabia without batting an eyelid at human rights abuses there. But it will not give African governments even simple weapons to defend themselves against insurgent groups that pose an existential threat. On the other hand, European officials often express frustration with their Ghanaian partners; alleging that they ask for equipment more suited to the battlefields of Ukraine than fighting bands of jihadists on motorbikes, are evasive and ineffectual on critical security issues, and often unhelpfully seek to hide gaps in their defence capabilities.

There is some truth in both sides' allegations about the other. But the fundamental point is that one of Europe's closest west African allies and most important partners in any regional solution to the crisis is at threat from the disorder advancing from its north, and its relationship with the EU is not operating on the level needed.

European failings in the Sahelian crisis and France's paralysis

The European campaign against armed groups in the central Sahel failed primarily because of deep-rooted social, cultural, and ethnic clashes among the region's diverse peoples. What was initially perceived as a straightforward fight against fundamentalists became entangled in an intricate web of violent attacks driven by ethnic tensions, poverty, and local conflicts — such as those between the region's Fulani herdsmen and pastoral farming communities like the Dogon in Mali and the Mossi in Burkina Faso.

Initially great hope was vested in the Western interventions in the region. France's Operation Serval in 2013 had major success in meeting its limited military objectives of liberating certain cities and towns from Ansar al-Din. Meanwhile European training programmes helped Sahelian soldiers hold major cities and urban settlements against armed groups. But neither local governments and forces nor international ones succeeded in providing state services or protection for swathes of rural areas. This left the field open to armed groups to exact taxes, swell their ranks with young men eager for cash, and set communities against each other through targeted assassinations of local leaders. By 2020, attacks had spread out across central Mali and Burkina Faso to westerly parts of Niger.

France has dominated Europe's response to the Sahelian crisis over the past decade. It made huge financial, diplomatic, and military sacrifices to prop up states there; spending up to €1bn per year on Operation Barkhane, a sprawling counter-jihadist mission across the Sahel region with 5,500 troops at its 2014-2022 peak. Fifty-three French soldiers were killed during that period. But a complicating factor was always the complex post-colonial political and economic relations between Paris and the region it often disparagingly called "*Françafrique*".

Most EU member states were always willing to defer to French regional policy objectives in exchange for cooperation elsewhere. Many governments saw their deployments to the UN peacekeeping mission in Mali or to support France's efforts in the Sahel as a means of currying favour with Paris on issues like Russia's threat to eastern Europe or even on the Brexit negotiations.[16] So those partners saw the operations in the Sahel as a box-ticking diplomatic exercise and were ultimately risk-averse with their soldiers.

Ulf Laessing, head of the Sahel programme at the Konrad Adenauer Foundation in Bamako, writes: "[European militaries] didn't want to give the Malian army weapons, not even for training sessions – asking Malian soldiers to pick branches from trees to imitate guns. The Malian army wanted 'real' training with soldiers going with them to the frontline, but Europe's half-hearted mission efforts had adopted a 'zero-risk' approach, which didn't achieve much in the end." Another example was the deployment of 300 highly trained British troops to Mali in December 2020 as the vanguard of a more agile UN peacekeeping mission. These were sent to Mali's far north, when most attacks against civilians were in the centre of the country. One former UK minister said only about half a dozen bullets were shot in anger throughout a two-year deployment costing roughly £1m a soldier deployed per year. [17]

Westerners must recognise that they contributed, at least partly, to the sense of weary disillusionment amongst many Sahelian soldiers and officers, which eventually lead to the coups in Bamako, Ouagadougou, and then Niamey. Often, local soldiers felt humiliated or

openly looked down upon. For example, during an US training exercise for African militaries held in Burkina Faso in 2019, some US soldiers locked certain toilets for only Western troops to use, claiming that local counterparts did not know how to do so. [18] This may seem like a small slight, but together such instances added up, creating a sense that under-equipped Sahelian soldiers were being fed into a meat grinder – all while most Western soldiers stayed in their armoured personnel carriers and Sahelian political elites dined out on development money.

The disinformation factor

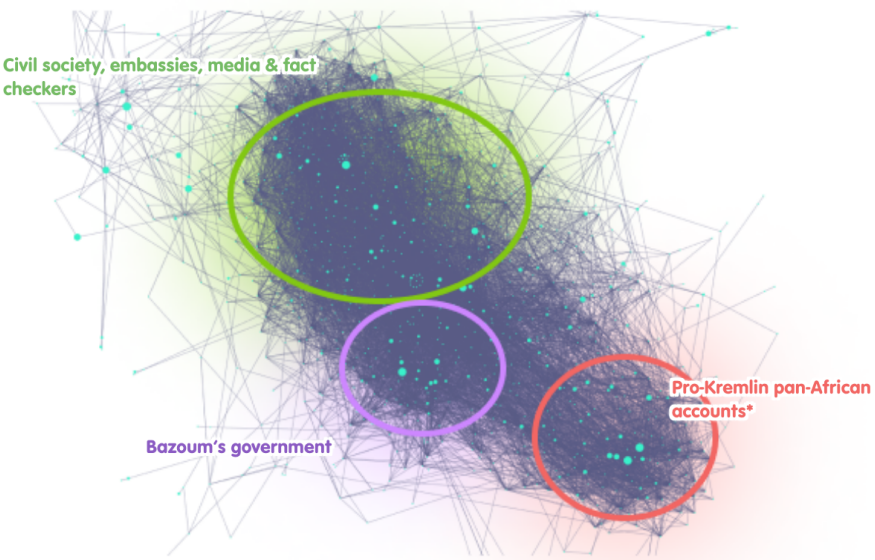
To these valid grievances was added the tidal wave of disinformation that broke over the region in recent years. France and other European states did not take seriously Russian and Chinese activities in this field until the dial of public opinion in the Sahel had already shifted radically against them. The author's interviews with local Sahelian soldiers in the run-up to the expulsion of Western forces revealed that many believed that France was secretly looting gold and uranium from the desert, arming jihadist and Tuareg rebel groups, and using drone intelligence to provide up-to-date information to the terrorists for devastating attacks on their barracks[19]. These views prevailed not just among the rank-and-file but often at senior levels too, with senior Sahelian officials sometimes taking a social media post that happened to cross their timeline as clear evidence of a new Western colonisation attempt in Africa.

The below charts paint a sobering picture. The first shows the evolution of X (formerly known as Twitter) accounts mentioning terms related to Niger from September 2022 to February 2024, with data gathered by Bloom, a French start-up that works on social media analysis.

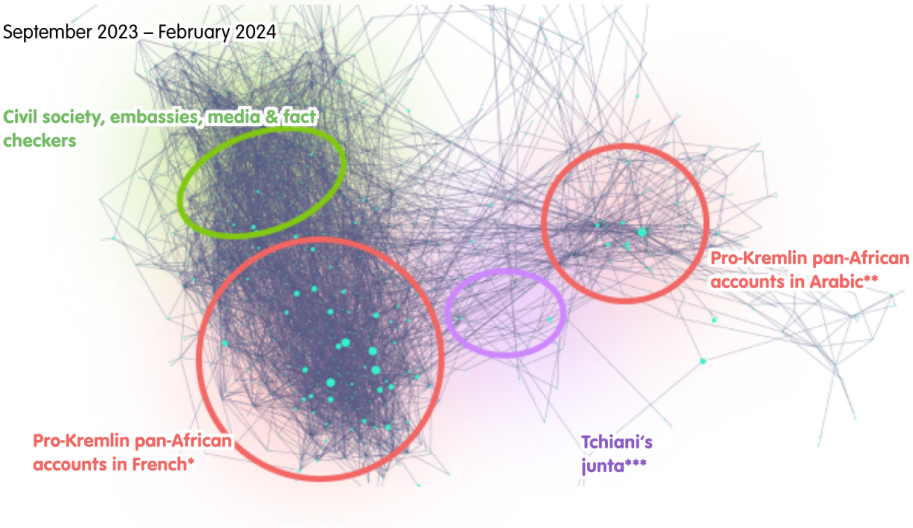
Each light-green node represents an account or a confluence of accounts, ranging from local politicians and mainstream international media to foreign-funded bot networks. Each grey line indicates an interaction such as a like, a share, or a comment. It shows how, over the period from 2022 to 2024, pro-Kremlin accounts achieved near-dominance of the information space through anonymous bot accounts, paid influencers, and promotion of already-friendly voices. Note the new circle showing Tchiani's junta hovering between the pro-Kremlin accounts in French and pro-Kremlin accounts in Arabic, feeding and interacting with both.

Twitter (X) accounts mentioning terms related to Niger

September 2022 – December 2022



September 2023 – February 2024



*Mostly paid influencers and anonymous accounts
**Paid influencers and media aggregators
***This cluster now ties pro-Kremlin actors across two languages, meaning that accounts that interact with the junta interact also the most with pro-Kremlin accounts in French and (less) in Arabic.

Source: Bloom Social Analytics

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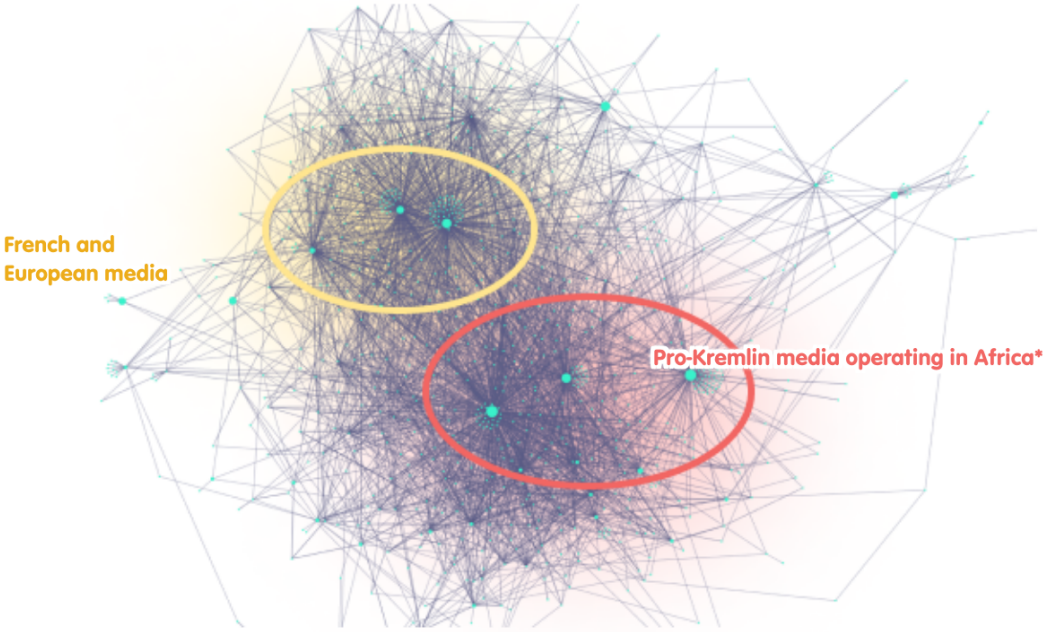
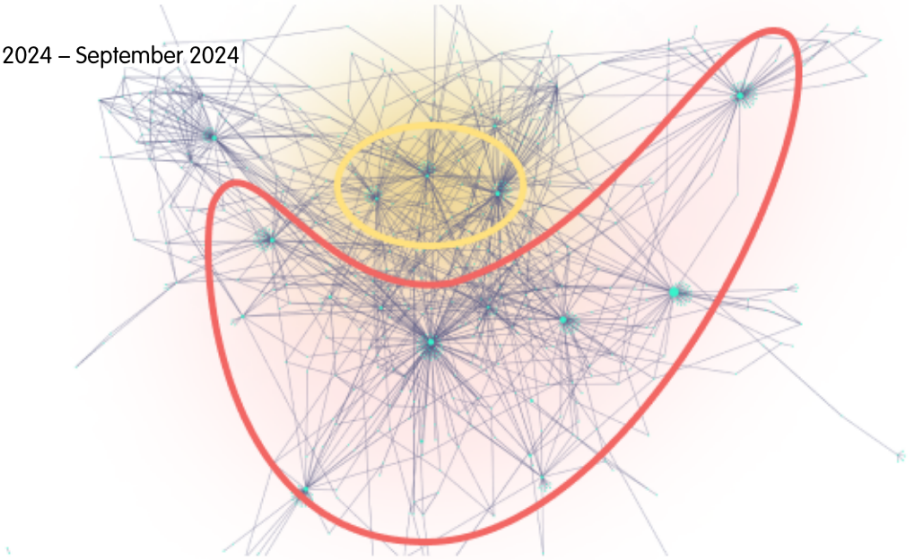
The second chart shows a similar phenomenon in neighbouring Chad. It, too, has seen a drastic surge in the reach of pro-Kremlin media and Russian paid influencers, far exceeding the European one.

YouTube accounts mentioning terms related to Chad

October 2022 – May 2023



June 2024 – September 2024



*Pro-Kremlin media, opinion leaders, and paid disinformation networks

Source: Bloom Social Analytics

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At points, these influence campaigns have verged on the ludicrous. Take the YouTube account of Coach Emmanuel L'Agronome, which has more than 100,000 subscribers. The young Beninese chicken farmer started his career as an influencer some four years ago making low-budget videos on poultry breeding. Then, in early 2024 his focus switched suddenly from his feathered friends to sensationalist, highly produced takes on geopolitics hailing Vladimir Putin and the junta leaders, and disparaging Western leaders like Macron.

The France factor

A deep-seated resentment of France is now widespread across much of francophone west Africa. This makes it hard to gauge where legitimate criticism of Paris's policies in the Sahel ends and where uninformed or misinformed attacks begin.

Anti-French sentiment is certainly much more than a mere product of Russian, Chinese, or pro-junta disinformation efforts. The seeds were sown by colonialism, a century of economic dominance by French companies, the perceived arrogance of French officials, and continued French support for leaders with poor democratic credentials. Paris's calls for democracy in the central Sahelian states are undermined by its reluctance to speak out on coups in Chad and Guinea Conakry, where the juntas happen to align with its interests. Moscow did not magically create a wave of anti-French sentiment in the Sahel. It merely encouraged it – then rode that wave to significance.

Many other European officials working on the Sahel resent France's approach to the region. While almost all acknowledge France as an indispensable partner in Africa – with top-tier intelligence, business, and expertise networks – they object that that they have followed Paris up the hill only to meet with disaster for all concerned. Their general criticism is that France misread the political climate in the Sahel over the last decade, set unrealistic military targets during Operation Barkhane, and blocked negotiations with jihadist groups because of its own domestic politics.

French officials, particularly those in the military, often retort that they have been, at best, abandoned and, at worst, "stabbed in the back" by their partners. They maintain that France shed blood and treasure for the collective security of Africa and Europe, but did not receive enough support at crucial moments from either ECOWAS or other European member states.

Paris is now making some efforts to Europeanise its west Africa strategy and devised an "*agenda transformationnel"* for its relations with Africa in 2021, hoping to recast the relationship in a more positive light. At the same time, Jean-Marie Bockel, President Emmanuel Macron's envoy for Africa, has also been leading dialogue efforts with four countries in the region

where France has a permanent military presence: Côte d'Ivoire, Chad, Gabon, and Senegal. At the time of writing Bockel was due to submit a report on the region to Macron. He has spoken in the past about reducing the French permanent military footprint, leaving its forces less exposed and more agile in helping African states when invited to do so.

These reforms have received a mixed reception across the EU – and indeed in Paris. One criticism is that they are more window dressing than serious assessment of France's failings in the Sahel. "If an Anglophone country had intervened abroad, spent billions, lost dozens of young soldiers and failed so comprehensively, there would be a public inquiry," said one official.[20]Some say France is paralysed by both the dysfunctional relationship between the Elysée and the Quai d'Orsay and a tendency in the country's military establishment to see the Sahel as its natural zone of influence. "France has a historic opportunity to reset its relations with francophone west Africa, but it's not taking it," said one EU official. [21]

The overarching truth is that France was the dominant European power engaging in the security crisis in the Sahel and that since its unceremonious exit from the region, no EU member state has either wanted or been able to fill the policy void. Instead, Europeans have scattered in all directions.

The scattered European herd

European member states are now in an unenviable position. One of the main quandaries circulating around Brussels roundtables and European capitals for much of 2024 has been to what extent member states should engage with the three juntas. Three broad approaches have emerged:

1. **The hardliners**

   The first camp is led by France and the EEAS. Its hardline approach leaves few openings for diplomatic, economic, developmental, or military cooperation with the three Sahelian juntas. It is focused on directing resources and training operations towards friendly Gulf of Guinea states. Sweden and Denmark have also followed a hardline approach, but one based more on human-rights principles. Both countries are cutting development aid and closing their embassies in Bamako and Ouagadougou. And both are moving resources away from the Sahel region towards more like-minded countries like Senegal and Ghana.

2. **The middle ground**

   The second camp is led by countries trying to tread a delicate middle line by maintaining their embassies and keeping the conversations and aid flows going, but building a firewall around security cooperation with the putschists. Germany, which has tried to stay engaged where appropriate with the Sahelian states, falls into this camp. So do Belgium and the Netherlands. Though not an EU member state, the UK is another notable member.

3. **The realpolitikers**

   A third broad camp views engagement with the Sahelian juntas as fundamentally compatible with Europe's strategic interest. Italy, for example, sees continued engagement with Niger as essential for controlling the flow of refugees and irregular migrants through Libya. It is the only EU member state to have kept special forces in Niger to help train local forces. Spain brings realpolitik to the Sahel crisis as the European country closest to the region geographically. Madrid sees cooperation with the Malian junta and neighbouring Mauritania as a strategic priority for migration and security reasons. It led the European Union Training Mission (EUTM) in Mali until the EU Council closed the operation in May 2024.

Hardliners achieve little

Should member states take the hardline approach, cutting off the juntas in the hope that they become more agreeable? This is an understandable response. "Why stay when your inroads are limited. you have been so badly treated, and rivals like Moscow are making gains and enabling mass human rights abuses?", the argument goes.

But this approach has simply ended up intensifying feelings of suspicion, rejection, and resentment among local armed forces and populations. Malians, Burkinabes, and Nigeriens – already struggling with the impacts of conflict – now face increased insecurity and a sense of being abandoned. European hardliners have left three of the world's poorest states even more isolated and weak. "Straight-up pressure tactics simply have not worked well," said one senior European official.

One strand of thinking in Paris is that the juntas will engage with the Russians, realise this is a poor option, and then return to France's warm embrace like a prodigal son in the desert. This seems fanciful and grounded in an outdated reading of the region. Even if Russia makes a dubiously valuable partner to Sahelian leaders, other middle powers are lining up to cut deals with them.

Even the more principled hardline policy from Sweden and Denmark is in practice short-termist. If the goal is to advance human rights, enable civil-society action, and counter Europe's adversaries, it does not make sense to quit when confronted with adversity. A better option is to stay and engage, quietly, as a force for moderation.

Merely threatening to withdraw support from a Sahelian junta if it collaborates with actors like Russia or Iran will not work. At different times in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, the putschists have all called the Western bluffs. Wagging a white European finger at regimes doing deals with hostile powers and walking away will achieve little other than irrelevance — and the entrenchment of the opponent's position.

The case for renewed strategic collaboration

A much better Sahel policy would be to acknowledge how complex and grim the situation is and stay engaged where possible – whether bilaterally, multilaterally, or both. The aim should be to avert complete state collapse on Europe's southern flank and act as a counterweight to powers hostile to Europe's interests. In other words, realpolitikers like Spain and middle-grounders like the UK, not hardliners like France, are closest to the right European policy on the Sahel.

An area the size of western Europe in west Africa is already radiating insecurity towards European partners in the Gulf of Guinea and the Maghreb. Jihadists from the Sahel have attacked Western companies, expats, and embassies. But if the warnings from officials in Europe and across the region are to be believed, it could be about to deteriorate further. The situation is already catastrophic in Burkina Faso.

Reengaging realistically

State failures in the Sahel would look much worse than the current limbo. They would force millions into flight and place untenable pressure on neighbouring states at a time when international funding for humanitarian crises like Sudan is already utterly insufficient. The region is home to the main arms, drugs, and people trafficking routes from sub-Saharan Africa to the Maghreb. The knock-on effects from even one failed state there would likely weigh down the wider west African region economically, lead to even more irregular migration, and thus polarise Europe's politics further. It is hard to think of a more obvious winner from a deteriorating Sahel than Putin.

A freer, more democratic Sahel region is not around the next corner. It will take decades of

toil from Malian, Burkinabe, and Nigerien citizens themselves. “The problem is these juntas are often deeply irrational and paranoid. I do not trust the juntas to act in their own best interest, let alone their people’s,” said one senior European official. But engagement, however ugly, is the only way Europe can realistically hope to help that process, retain some influence, encourage moderation, and move towards its strategic priority of a stable Sahel region.

Moreover, given the dire security crisis and dissatisfaction both with new foreign actors and with the juntas themselves in the military ranks, there is a reasonable chance of a change of government in at least one of the three central Sahelian states within the next year. Maintaining some low- or mid-level engagement would render EU member states and their partners in West Africa better prepared for this, with political connections and networks in place to offer support to any new government.

Europe’s engagement in the Sahel for the last decade has been dominated by France’s relations with its former colonies. It exuded elite transnationalism and paternalism, and pursued unrealistic military aims. So in the immediate term, at least, Paris should take a back seat and not hamper other European efforts to calm the waters. Anti-French sentiment in the Sahel is much more pronounced than anti-European sentiment. Where there is anti-European sentiment, it is often because Europe is associated with France, which in turn is associated with a revolving door of parasitic elites.

Other member states still have good, or at least neutral, reputations in the region. Germany and Denmark are seen as strong partners in the Gulf of Guinea. Italy’s special-forces presence in Niger works well. Most central and eastern European countries, which have no colonial links to the region, also have good reputations. An informal group comprised of the Netherlands, the UK, Germany, Belgium, Spain, and Italy could lead a new engagement push in the Sahelian states at the “minilateral” level. Germany is probably the best-placed to coordinate this. Italy could also play a role, at least, in Niger, if Rome manages to maintain its constructive cooperation with the government there – though concerns over migration should not be allowed to dominate European policy.

Engagement with the Sahelian juntas should pursue four central goals:

1. Stabilise the immediate diplomatic and security crisis in the Sahel
2. Maintain in-country expertise and information-gathering networks
3. Provide a counterweight to hostile and destabilising powers in the region that have no qualms about mass human rights abuses
4. Quietly support incremental, positive change in civil society rights, accountability, and anti-corruption measures

European governments must be clear-eyed, realistic, and humble as it proceeds in the Sahel. It is not dealing with three fragile and problematic democratic leaders like it was a decade before. The days of nation-building-lite are long gone. The Sahel will not be a "laboratory" for lofty, out-of-touch concepts dreamed up in Brussels, Geneva, and Washington.

Instead, Europe is dealing with three openly antagonistic and often deeply irrational juntas that believe they are in an existential fight for the survival of their nations. They are all justifiably paranoid about their positions and hemmed in by complex local power politics and anti-Western rhetoric. Even if they desperately wanted European support to avert collapse, it would be hard for them to accept it. The EU's Sahel strategy will be a day-by-day struggle in which its diplomats should be given sufficient space and resources to do their jobs.

The case for cooperation

Europeans should at the very least maintain their current level of engagement. The Sahel will never be Europe's top foreign policy priority in a world of Russian tanks in Ukraine and Israeli strikes on Gaza and Lebanon. But member states would do well to maintain, and ideally expand, their diplomatic presence on the ground. They should not endorse the military juntas at the highest political level, but neither do they need to condemn outright or isolate them. Working on the technical or ministerial level is still the best way forward, but recognition at the top junta level should be an option if certain core European aims are met.

Where engagement is not possible, member states should try to stay engaged through regional platforms like ECOWAS. If direct cooperation with juntas is not politically acceptable, indirect cooperation through the coastal Gulf of Guinea states may be the best way forward. Successful normalisation efforts between the AES states and ECOWAS would help this. It should all be done carefully and discretely, as ECOWAS leaders are often criticised at home for being too lenient towards the West.

The UK is usefully positioned here. It has no colonial history in the central Sahelian states and negligible economic interests. And it sits outside the EU and has a strong diplomatic presence across Africa. London could serve as a disproportionally influential mediator facilitating back-channel negotiations.

One of the central reasons why the three juntas moved away from the Western-led counter-terror response and towards the Russian one is that they felt Europeans imposed their own

value system on Sahelian militaries. Therefore, beyond a few training programmes – like Italy's in Niger – any military response to the crisis in the three central Sahelian states is generally out of the question for now.

However, if the opportunity does arise to train Sahelian troops in third countries like Senegal or Ghana, EU member states should at least consider it. There are major risks associated with honing soldiers who could go on to serve alongside Russian operatives and commit heinous abuses. But serious European training sessions conducted *en masse* like those provided to Ukrainian armed forces – with compulsory courses on the laws of war – would dramatically weaken Moscow's hand in the region and show the EU's determination to address the crisis. Before rejecting the idea outright, European officials should ask themselves whether it is really better to leave the training of Sahelian troops to outside powers who care little about human rights and legal standards.

If EU member states cannot help the Sahelian states militarily, they can at least try to mitigate any potential collapse by keeping both development and humanitarian aid flowing. This would support the union's own security interests, maintain diplomatic inroads into the Sahel, and avoid Europe abandoning millions of Sahelians to the whims of men with guns on either side. But the red line should be any development aid being siphoned into military operations.

Europeans should together redouble efforts in Gulf of Guinea states like Ghana, Côte d'Ivoire, and Benin. In particular, Spain, Germany, Belgium, Denmark, Sweden, and the UK are all well-placed to do more and build on previous EU and bilateral initiatives along west Africa's southern coast. Denmark, the UK, and Spain could boost cooperation with the Gulf of Guinea states on coastal piracy and trafficking patrols, while Germany could strengthen its work with the US on the Coastal State Stability Mechanism, which the two countries helped to launch in coordination with Benin in early 2024.

One of the problems with the European military response over the last decade, and a point that turned many Sahelian soldiers against Europe, was the refusal to provide lethal equipment. This has given hostile powers like Russia far too much influence. European governments should consider providing more lethal equipment, handheld drones, and more military training for the Gulf of Guinea states to help contain the crisis on their borders. Of course, this should not be rushed, but rather undertaken only after appropriate vetting and research of capacity gaps. But policymakers in European capitals should not be paralysed by fear. They have friends and allies in this strategically crucial region. They can and should support these.

At the same time, European governments should invest more in regional civil society and media organisations on the periphery of the Sahelian states whose support for democracy, accountability, and civil society engagement has a 'positive spillover' into the region. They should also increase support for peace-building NGOs like the West African Centre for Counter-Extremism in Accra or the WATHI Citizens think-tank in Dakar.

Taking up the fight on disinformation

But these actions will amount to little if Europe does not change one central thing: its anti-disinformation strategy. The EU and its member states urgently need to overhaul their toothless policies on the deliberate and pernicious spread of false information, which has left them at the mercy of well-funded propaganda campaigns from the likes of China, Russia, and certain states in Latin America.[22] They need to shift the narrative onto the manifold failings and exploitative practices of other powers in the Sahel, and communicate more effectively the good work they are doing in the region. This requires a serious investment of resources and personnel in non-official communication channels that speak to people in their own language and expose what hostile powers are doing.

A growing coalition of officials in European capitals recognise that their governments' communication strategy in west Africa has been a complete failure; a mix of ineffective 2017-style fact-checking and approved X posts in technocratic Brussels-speak[23]. These posts generally appear on ambassadorial or embassy accounts, whose number of followers is irrelevant in a region where the platform which has an negligible penetration rate (0.3 per cent in Mali in early 2024, for example). Worse still, posts on the Sahel are almost always made in French, the former coloniser's language, rather than in local languages. They rarely reflect local tone and values.

Some efforts have been made to reboot Europe's fight against disinformation since the Russian destabilisation campaign in the Sahel. For example, the EU has developed a team to counter disinformation on Ukraine, with a small Africa department attached. Spain is also taking innovative steps to inform Spanish citizens exposed to disinformation about Africa through Latin American networks. The UK is working with countries like Ghana and Nigeria to make their information space more resilient.

But most of these programmes are inadequately staffed and funded to meet the scale of the challenge ahead. Relatively small amounts of funding, more coordination, and new strategies to shape the agenda on platforms that are actually used could make a difference. Dedicated staff based in the region, with expertise in local languages and an understanding of local nuances and trends, are essential.

European policymakers should consider more support for local bloggers, influencers, and regional media outlets that critically interrogate hostile powers' disinformation efforts and claims. They should consider other, more widely used apps like WhatsApp and other such non-official means of communication. Moreover, there is a wealth of intelligence across the member states showing exactly what hostile actors are doing in the Sahel. Europeans have the capacity and the resources to expose it.

The hour of realpolitik and moderation

Events in the Sahel in the early days of October 2024 made few – if any – major headlines around the world. Global attentions were fixed on the Middle East. But at once horrifying, bizarre, and widely unnoticed outside the region, those Sahelian events perfectly represented the now-banal insanity of the crisis there.

Jihadists affiliated with Al Qaeda attacked Manni, a town in north-eastern Burkina Faso. Reports from the ground indicate that the gunmen stormed through the settlement, killing members of the local militia forces and attacking army positions before going on a two-to-three-day spree of violence against local citizens. They killed local nurses at a dispensary, several gold miners, and a local headmaster. In audio obtained by this author, a local teacher cries: "This is not an attack: this is cleansing." Traoré spoke at length on Burkinabe radio downplaying the attack, clearly wary of admitting the security failure. [24]

Meanwhile, in Niger, a photo of an alleged Nigerien security briefing circulated on social media. It stated that Belgium's special forces were planning an invasion of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger and that garrisons should be on high alert. While the contents were objectively ludicrous, the origin was unclear. It could very well have been a fake leak; part of a Russian disinformation campaign to sow confusion and conspiracy. But it is also conceivable that the briefing was authentic. That very possibility demonstrates how far down the rabbit hole of paranoid delusion the Nigerien junta has gone – in a state until recently considered the West's closest partner in the region.

Just another week in the life of a rolling political and humanitarian calamity that does not command even a fraction of the attention in the EU that the union's own self-interest – let alone its professed values – ought to dictate.

After a decade of failure in the Sahel, there is no grand strategy available to European policymakers. No one-size-fits-all answer or easy fix is on offer. Instead, they stand before an array of unappealing options, the most realistic of which demand perseverance and

commitment. It all makes for an unenviable set of choices. But choose they must.

About the author

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Acknowledgements

The author is indebted to dozens of officials, researchers, journalists, and interlocutors across Africa and Europe who gave their time. Nastassia Zenovich designed the crisp charts, while Berke Alikasifoglu of Bloom contributed greatly to the social media analysis. This brief owes a great deal of its form to the clear thoughts and fine-tuning of both Jeremy Cliffe and Julien Barnes-Dacey. Thanks also go to Maite Iriarte Arrieta and Lena Krause for their tireless support. Most of all, thanks go to a researcher in the Sahel who cannot be named because of security reasons.

[1] Interviews with various European officials, March to July 2024

[2] Interviews with various European officials, March to July 2024

[3] Interview with European military officer meeting, May 2024

[4] Interviews in Ouagadougou, June to July 2024

[5] Interviews in Ouagadougou, June to July 2024

[6] Source in Ouagadougou

[7] Interview with European official, June 2024

[8] Interviews with European officials in June 2024 and ECFR research in Ouagadougou

[9] Interview with European official, June 2024

[10] Interview with West African official, June 2024

[11] Interviews with European officials, July 2024

[12] Interview, June 2024

[13] Interviews with various European officials from June to July 2024

[14] Interviews with two Western officials, June and July 2024

[15] Western official interviewed in Accra, June 2023

[16] Author's interview with UK minister, Nairobi 2022

[17] Interview with UK minister, Nairobi, 2022

[18] Author's reporting on Operation Flintlock in Burkina Faso, 2019

[19] Author's reporting in the region

[20] Interview with an EU official in Brussels, May 2024

[21] Interview with an EU official in Brussels, May 2024

[22] Interviews with various European officials, March to July 2024

[23] Interviews with various European officials, March to July 2024

[24] Author's reporting

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ISBN: 978-1-916682-56-6. Published by the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR), 4th Floor, Tennyson House, 159-165 Great Portland Street, London W1W 5PA, United Kingdom.