

Sahel: The Quest for the Hinterland (Part I)

Strategic Competition in the Heart of Africa Intensifies

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“The succession of military coups will make the region [of Sahel] more unstable for years ahead.”

– Ursula von der Leyen, 2023 State of the Union speech

The global security environment continues to erode as international polarization heightens. The accelerating strategic competition of opposing powers and alliances complicates and degrades different regional crises. While the major anxiety is fixated now on the war in Europe and the calamity in the Middle East, situations in some other parts of the world are also on the road to evolving into worst-case scenarios. One such area is the Sahel region, located in the heart of the African continent. The collapsing status quo, shifting geopolitical balances, and mounting troubles in the Sahel have no impending solutions and represent a cumulative security challenge, the resulting effects of which are likely to be felt far beyond that region and, indeed, that continent.

This IDD Analytical Policy Brief first offers an outlook on the main underlying causes at the core of the region’s turmoil. Furthermore, it evaluates the set of violent non-state actors operating in the Sahel, the reasons behind their rise, and their produced impact on the domestic instability in the states of the region. Then, the essay analyses the composition of the external state actors competing with each other over regional influence, their geopolitical considerations, strategic

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drivers, and applied practical solutions, with the main emphasis on Russia given its position as the most proactive current player in the Sahel. The essay consists of two consecutive parts.

A Land in Trouble: Doomed by Geography and Climate

The Sahel region (often referred to as the Sahel Belt) represents a vast geographic area in the form of an east-west strip of arid land that stretches for almost 4,000 km from the Atlantic Ocean to the Red Sea through the entire African continent. There are divergent views of which countries fall into that region. As a rule, Senegal, Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Chad, and Sudan are the Sahel countries, since large portions of their territories fall within the geographic limits of the region. However, parts of Nigeria, Cameroon, South Sudan, Ethiopia, and Eritrea are also related to the same area, although those countries are usually not considered Sahel states. Still, the core regional group, which is the focus of international concern (and thus, of this paper), consists of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, also known as the Sahel Troika or the Sahel Trio.

The Sahel is an inhospitable climatic zone consisting of a mix of semi-desert and grassland to the maximum extent. That arid landscape defines desolation and water scarcity in most parts of the region. Furthermore, climate change has led to a rise in already high temperatures, shortened rainy seasons, and shrunk arable land, making agriculture activities risky. Meanwhile, [over two-thirds](#) of the region's population is directly dependent on farming and cattle breeding.

On that depressive natural background, demography places high pressure on scarce resources. Over 300 million people live in the Sahel, and the birth rate there is one of the highest in the world. At the same time, the human development index is one of the lowest. Poverty, malnutrition, and food insecurity instigate competition for resources, which often turns violent. Furthermore, the diverse ethnic, linguistic, and confessional composition of the region certainly adds to the friction. For centuries, the nomadic shepherds inhabiting the northern part of the Sahel Belt have been predominantly of Muslim origin, while the farmers further south are mainly Christians who suffer negative consequences from grazing caused by livestock on their land. A combination of differences in tribal associations, cultural-religious relationships, and ways of life magnifies the preconditions for the conflict.

A longstanding record of weak statehood and ineffective (and sometimes illegitimate) governance provide another set of preconditions for instability. All states that are in some way or another related to the Sahel Belt are fragile. Bad management, corruption, tribalism, military interventions in politics, and a culture of violence arrest the perspective for development. In 2019-2023 there were eight coups d'état and several failed coup attempts in Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Chad, and Sudan. Only in 2022, Burkina Faso experienced both a coup and a counter-coup, while Mali in 2021-2022

also witnessed two armed putsches. Those events led to a takeover of power in both countries by military juntas, and Niger followed suit in 2023. Those turbulent events, beyond other reasons, reflect a broader trend: change in the elites' generation. The previous cohort in all three countries was tied to a former colonial power; these are now being challenged by younger ones, which lean towards alternative foreign power brokers in their quest for control of authority and resources.

One of the most distinct indicators of the regional states' weaknesses is the enduring jihadist insurgencies. This phenomenon proliferates owing to radicalization in segments of the populace, caused by the aforementioned distresses. The lasting violence is one of the factors producing the increasing displacement of people and their exodus (typically towards Europe via illegal trails controlled by criminal elements tied to the same jihadist actors). The deteriorated security situation and the inability of former ruling regimes to combat jihadist movements became one of the triggers of the last series of military coups in the Sahel states.

The Sahel Belt naturally separates two mega-regions of the African continent: the North (a.k.a. Arab) Africa and the Sub-Saharan (a.k.a. Tropical) Africa. Therefore, it absorbs a shock of crises and flashpoints developing in the outer perimeter of the Sahel. Libya has remained split into two warring parts since 2011. Algeria continues to combat its domestic jihadists and confronts Morocco in its dispute over the status of Western Sahara. Ethiopia and Eritrea are in perpetual conflict. Somalia remains broken up and infested by terrorist actors. Part of the adjacent territory of Nigeria suffers from an Islamist terrorist insurgency that is steadily expanding like an ink spot to nearby Cameroon and Chad, thus "bridging" those affected regions with the inherently volatile Central African Republic and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Finally, competition among the extra-regional powers over the Sahel increases. Its strategic location, abundant natural resources (e.g., oil, gas, uranium, industrial minerals, gold, diamonds), and the logic of the zero-sum game drive it. While the footprint of France and the U.S. has relatively shrunk recently, Russia, China, and Türkiye are rushing to fill the vacuum. There are also other players, such as India, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates, as is discussed in the second part of this IDD Analytical Policy Brief.

Altogether, six paramount factors—geography, climate, socio-economic depression, weak statehood, extremist ideology-inspired armed violence, and foreign meddling—determine the Sahel region's condition as one of the most unstable areas in the world.

Pestilence: Jihadists Who Came from the Sands

Before assessing the patterns of foreign competition over the Sahel, there is a need to grasp the evolution of the regional security landscape over the past decade, as well as

assess the phenomenon of jihadist insurgency, which functions as a formal pretext and justification for foreign interventions.

The starting point has been formed with the overthrow of the regime of Muammar Kaddafi in 2011, the ensuing civil war, and the collapse of Libya as a cohesive state. The conflict opened a Pandora's Box: thousands of militants with weapons from the sacked military storage facilities started to circulate along Trans-Saharan "rat trails" through porous interstate borders. The nucleus jihadist groups, inspired by the chaos of the so-called "Arab Spring" in the Middle East, entered the game, tapping into the nurturing environment created in the Sahel states by poverty, social inequality, a dysfunctional economy, and corrupt power.

By 2012-2013, the northern parts of Mali had become an area dominated by an armed terrorist insurgency led by the local Islamists, who seized control over certain territories with the assistance of Algerian jihadist groups. At that stage, France opted to intervene militarily in the region, which it saw as belonging to its sphere of influence, in order to assist local governments in the restoration of security and order. However, the French counterinsurgency operations *Serval* and *Barkhane* (it included over 5,000 servicemen at the peak time), supported by military contingents from twelve EU member states (Task Force Takuba)—most of which are also NATO member states—and thousands of soldiers from African states, produced modest results in crushing the jihad in Mali. In the same way, the separate U.S. mission in Niger (consisting of reconnaissance drones and some 600 special operation forces soldiers deployed at the desert base) brought equally uncertain outcomes. By 2020, the violent Islamist cluster in the Sahel had gained strength, notwithstanding Western and local efforts.

At the current stage, the terrorist-jihadist landscape in the Sahel is quite fragmentary but dynamic. The present outfits preserve a formal ideological affiliation to one of two leaderless transcontinentally distributed Salafist-jihadist terror networks—Al-Qaeda (AQ) and the Islamic State (IS)—but maintain operational autonomy. Besides government forces, they are also fighting each other. The AQ-affiliated cluster consists of the Group to Support Islam and Muslims (JNIM), Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), and two factions of the Group of Followers of Sunna for Call and Jihad (JAS, also known as Boko Haram). The partisans of the IS include the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) and the Islamic State's West Africa Province (ISWAP). The estimated combined strength of all factions is no less than 15,000 hardcore fighters. A further complicating factor is the Tuareg movement, which includes both ethno-nationalist and Islamist elements. That ethnic group, numbering up to 2 million people in Mali, Niger, Libya, and Algeria, distinguishes itself from other populations, feels discriminated against by governments, and seeks a separate homeland that its partisans call Azawad. Some of the Tuareg outfits are tactically aligned with jihadists. In fact, they became the first actors to move weapons from Libya into the Sahel after the collapse of Kaddafi's regime.

Rough terrain with vast spaces, scattered settlements, and porous interstate borders predetermine the *modus operandi* of the jihadist militants. In particular, they apply maneuver warfare centered on long-range raids by mobile groups moving on all-terrain vehicles fitted with fire assets (the Free France forces and the British SAS first effectively introduced that kind of tactic during the 1941-1942 campaign in the North African war theatre). The militants have enough weapons, including air defense assets, and sporadically use suicide bombers. Their means of sustainment come from drug trafficking, arms smuggling, racket and illegal taxation, and, probably, through support from independent actors in the Gulf States (the engagement of jihadist communities into the global narcotics industry was referenced in a previous [IDD Analytical Policy Brief](#)).

Areas affected by the terrorist-jihadist insurgency encompass the northern and central parts of Mali, the western region of Niger, and vast portions of Burkina Faso. The focal point is the tri-border area in which the frontiers of those three states come together. Another hotbed of jihadist violence is the nearby area of Lake Chad and the northeastern province of Nigeria. The metastasis of insecurity caused by jihadist activities has started to steadily migrate southward to so far relatively stable Cameroon, Ghana, Cote d'Ivoire, Benin, and Togo.

The jihadist entities quite surely control certain remote areas, where they try to introduce elements of quasi-state-building based on their interpretation of Islamic law (sharia). That track includes crime prevention, food and medicine distribution, water well digging, and other “hearts and minds” activities. The grievances of impoverished and ignorant local communities are a force multiplier exploited by Islamist propaganda in recruiting additional fighters. At the same time, jihadist leaders frequently project indiscriminate violence against those societal groups they regard as hostile or neutral. Violence breeds violence: government military forces, gendarmeries, and state-sponsored levy militias engaged in counterinsurgency operations habitually operate in the same way, abusing civilians.

According to observers' estimates, which are often incomplete and vary, over 22,000 people were killed in terrorist attacks in the region between 2007 and 2022. In 2021-2022, the number of terrorism-related fatalities in the Sahel Trio countries (Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger) increased by 50 percent. As of 2023, [48 percent of terrorist violence victims](#) around the globe died in the aforementioned three countries and neighboring Cameroon. In addition to the tens of thousands of people killed, millions more became refugees or internally displaced persons in the past decade. The combined cost of economic disruption and securitization of states in that period is measured in the billions of dollars.

The ineffectiveness of the France-led Western military effort in suppressing terrorist activity became the formal foundation for a demand to terminate the intervention, which was issued by Malian military rulers who had taken power

after the 2021 coup. French and other European troops began to redeploy to nearby Niger and Chad. At that stage, another player entered the game...

TO BE CONTINUED... The second part of this IDD Analytical Policy Brief will cover issues related to the patterns of expanding Russian influence in the Sahel and will evaluate the status of other actors involved in the competition unfolding in the region.