

Silence in the Sahel does not Equal Stability

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The Sahel is no longer on the frontpages. In the past few years – even in the past few months – the geopolitical context has changed radically. The Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine understandably turned European attention to the East in 2022. The Israel – Palestine armed conflict which restarted in 2023 and has taken unprecedented proportions has also called for attention, while the last three years of [Rwanda-supported rebel invasion in the East of the DRC](#) recently caught the news. In more recent weeks, the new US administration’s deeply disturbing dismantling of national institutions and international order has predictably stolen the headlines. Yet, in the meantime the different crises which have plagued the Sahel over more than a decade are continuing and the situation is worsening.

The military regimes which came to power in the latest coup wave in the Sahel region on the promise of quelling jihadist violence have not been able to deliver on this promise. Instead, jihadist groups are expanding across the region, with deadlier attacks against civilians in Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso, the three states which created the Alliance of Sahelian States (AES) in 2023. The Sahel is today the region in the world which is [the most affected by jihadist violence](#).

The AES countries are also experiencing a deepening authoritarian turn, as the transitions to democratic elections and return to constitutional order have been stalled with continuous extensions of transitional periods and repression against opposition voices. These developments are unfolding within a heavily restricted

media landscape, where local independent and foreign journalists and news agencies are either silenced through repression or driven into exile, while civil society faces continued intimidation and oppression, including forced military recruitment, arbitrary arrests and in some cases summary executions.

This article analyses the latest developments in the security and political sphere in the Sahel with a focus on the AES states. It examines the expansion of jihadist violence and assesses the political situation. It argues that despite the current geopolitical context and Europe’s decreasing influence, there is still a need for the EU and its member states to stay engaged. It is crucial to closely monitor developments in the region to better grasp the political and security landscape, and potential implications both within and beyond the African continent.

This article is the first of a series of two analyzing the shifting political and security landscape in the Sahel. The next article will examine the AES countries’ shifting regional and international partnerships.

FAR FROM SECURE: JIHADIST EXPANSION AND LOCAL CONFLICTS

Ten years ago, the Sahel had the lowest number of violent extremism-related fatalities in Africa. By 2024, it had become the deadliest region on the continent, with an astonishing [threefold increase in fatalities since 2021](#), reaching 11,200 deaths. Islamist terrorist violence has escalated exponentially, particularly following the coup wave between 2020 and 2023. However, this figure does not include the [2,430 civilian deaths attributed to national](#)

[security forces](#) and their Russian partners in 2024. Given these numbers, state security actors may have killed more civilians over the past year than militant Islamist groups, bringing the total number of civilian victims of armed violence to unprecedented levels.

Mali

In Mali, the ousting of MINUSMA in 2023 and the subsequent [relaunch of armed conflict against the Turaeg separatists in the North](#) of the country by the Malian regime led to renewed violence with the state forces, accompanied by Russian troops. Since then the Malian security forces are fighting both separatist movements and jihadist groups, both of whom the Malian regime now addresses as ‘terrorists’. While the Malian transitional authorities’ [takeover of Kidal in October 2023](#) – a city which during a decade had been in under rebel control - boosted the regime’s sovereignty narrative, it did not imply a radical shift of the balance of power. Instead, contextual and contingent ad hoc cooperation between the Strategic Framework for the Defense of the People of Azawad (CSP-DPA) and JNIM (the Al-Qaida affiliated coalition of jihadist groups), led to an [embarrassing defeat for the Malian forces and their Russian Wagner partners](#) less than a year later in July 2024 in Tinzaouaten, on the Algerian border. The ambush also led to the death of approximately 40 Malian soldiers and 80 Wagner troops, the biggest loss that the Russian group had experienced since deployed in the region.

In the fall of 2024, the jihadist groups further expanded their presence across the country and JNIM conducted [two simultaneous attacks against a gendarmerie school and the military airport in Bamako](#) in September, killing over 70 Malian security forces and destroying the presidential plane. Whereas the capacity to conduct such attacks may have been present since the last attack in Bamako in 2015, the actual will and audacity to do so lacked, demonstrating a bolder stance by the jihadist group. The attacks were thus highly symbolic, first because it put the Malian security forces’ failures of asserting territorial control on full display, and second, because the group only targeted security forces, showcasing a desire to

both humiliate the authorities and attempts to gain (or maintain) popular support. The latter aspect of gaining popular support has also been a recurrent feature in JNIM’s communications, thus demonstrating a broader strategy standing in contrast to the Islamic State Sahel Province’s use of [governance by fear](#).

It is nevertheless not only security forces that have been targeted in jihadist attacks. In July 2024 an attack in the Mopti region in central Mali [killed 40 people during a wedding](#) party. The Malian military authorities also killed over 20 civilians in [drone strikes in August 2024](#) close to Tinzaouaten in retaliation for the July ambush, demonstrating that civilians are caught between violence from both state and non-state armed actors. Attacks continued in 2025, with more than [50 people killed near the city of Gao](#) in February by jihadist groups attacking a military convoy escorting civilians. In spite of this deteriorating security contexts, [according to polls from 2024](#), Malians still had a strong faith in their armed forces’ capacities and their reputed ‘montée en puissance’ (rise in power) narrative.

Burkina Faso

Burkina Faso’s security situation has continuously deteriorated since the military takeover in 2022. In 2024, reports showed that the state armed forces [had lost control of 60% of the territory](#), with JNIM activity in 11 out of 13 regions and while such figures may be impossible to verify, observers in the country attest that jihadist groups can move freely across Burkina Faso. JNIM’s increasing influence in the country is also reflected in the record high numbers of fatalities, with deaths having [increased by 68% in 2023](#) from the year before, a morbid record which 2024 nevertheless was set to surpass. Especially given that the deadliest attack in the history of Burkina Faso took place in the town of Barsalgho in August 2024. The incident displayed aspects of cruel irony, as citizens were [forced to assist the security forces to protect the town](#) against attacks by digging trenches. During the digging work, jihadists from JNIM entered the town and [killed between 130 and 600 people, a gruesome record](#) for attacks in the region at large.

State armed forces have also committed atrocities against civilians in Burkina Faso. In February 2024, Human Rights Watch reported that the state military had [summarily executed at least 223 civilians](#) in two villages on the same day. The state security forces' attacks on civilians continued throughout 2024 and into 2025, with macabre reports about [soldiers mutilating corpses](#). New reports surfaced in March of massacres of Peul civilians – a group which has been especially targeted due to their presumed link to jihadist organisations – in Sourou Valley by the armed civilian volunteers, the Volunteers for the Defense of the Homeland (VDP). While considered as a successful operation against terrorists by the state forces, [reports detailed tens of victims](#), the majority children, elderly people and women. Allegedly in retribution for the killing of Peuls, JNIM conducted a major attack on a military camp in the town of Diapaga at the end of March, killing more than 30 soldiers and VDPs, in what was framed by the jihadists as [“the beginning of revenge for Solenzo”](#).

The high number of fatalities is partly explained by the Burkina regime's decision to arm civilians to counter extremists and terrorists. While the strategy dates back to 2020, it was expanded after the second coup in 2022 when Captain Traoré, Burkina's military leader, announced the [recruitment of 50,000](#) additional self-defense militias, VDPs, to help fight terrorists.

The strategy is as simple as it is dangerous: civilians follow a brief two-week training by the Burkinabé security forces after which they receive a weapon, communication means and a financial [support of 200,000 CFA](#) (approximately 300 euros) per month, with a renewable contract of a year. The influx of badly trained, armed civilians from only certain communities –Peuls being excluded for recruitment due to their perceived alliances with jihadist – has resulted in [increased ethnic tensions and exacerbated reports of intercommunal violence](#). In addition, groups and villages of VDPs have been increasingly targeted by jihadist in retaliation raids for their mobilisation. As a result, lines between state armed forces, VDPs, jihadists and civilians, have been increasingly blurred, effectively militarizing the Burkinabé society in the sense that a large

part of the population is in some way connected to an armed group, whether a state or a non-state actor.

In 2024 reports of forced recruitment of vocal opponents of the military authorities into the VDPs added a new dimension to this complex reality, where 'volunteer' loses its meaning. Especially so, as many of the [VDPs also are put at the frontline as 'cannon fodder'](#). The increased figure of mass violence and human rights violations have also contributed to the record high number of [over 2 million internally displaced persons](#) in the country.

Niger

Niger, although in a relatively better security situation than its AES neighbours with regard to jihadist attacks, saw an increase of the lethality of the attacks since the coup in 2023. In the months following the coup the Nigerien military increased the number of operations carried out, yet both the number of civilians killed by jihadist groups and the number of militants killed and arrested by security forces surged. The Nigerien security forces [also killed three times as many civilians](#) since the coup compared with the year leading up to the coup, making the situation even more difficult for civilians, being caught between non-state armed actors and state armed forces, just as in neighbouring countries.

Research by S4 showed that the security situation continued to deteriorate in 2024, with the [state armed forces coming under attack 51 times](#) in the first nine months of the year – close to a doubling of the figure for all of 2023. The same research also demonstrated that the number of non-state armed groups had increased while becoming more confrontational. This was evidenced in a large number of attacks by jihadist organisations targeting both civilians and security forces during 2024. In March 2024 [at least 23 Nigerien soldiers were killed](#) in an attack in the Tillabéri region, while in December two attacks days after each other [killed 39 civilians](#) in west Niger near the border with Burkina Faso. The attacks continued in 2025, with a mosque attack by the [Islamic State in the Greater Sahara \(ISGS\) killing 44 civilians](#) in March. Niger might be comparatively better off than its neighbours

regarding jihadist expansion on its territory, yet the security situation has been continuously deteriorating since July 2023.

Whereas all three AES states face an expanding jihadist presence, important differences in the groups and their involvement with both local armed groups and civilian populations remain. Similarly, while all three regimes have favored a highly militarized approach to deal with the jihadist threat, they also differ in their strategies. In Mali, state forces have continued to team up with Russian troops to fight both jihadist movements and separatist groups, attempting to retake the North of the country. Rather than involve the Russians in combat, the Burkina regime has mobilised and armed civilians, resulting in a vicious circle of violence of revenge attacks between volunteers and JNIM, targeting civilians. Niger has faced more threats from IS Sahel, along the Niger-Mali border but also elements of JNIM in the Tillabéri and Dosso region. Whereas Niger authorities also have used self-defense militias, they have done so on a lower scale and in a more controlled manner than its neighbour.

A trend across the AES countries however, are bouts of high-impact or mass-casualty attacks with the help of air and drone strikes, IEDs and mortar shelling, by both JNIM and IS Sahel, which demonstrates a [change in combat tactics](#). Similarly, while villages have been attacked, so far jihadist groups have remained focused on the rural areas – with the exception of the Bamako attacks – and have avoided attempts to overtake larger cities, as it would imply unnecessary risks for limited benefits. The [collection of “zakat”](#) is easier to collect in rural areas with less risk of retribution by state security forces. Yet, reports about [‘community dialogues’ between JNIM sub-groups and the Malian transitional authorities](#) surfaced in the beginning of April. If confirmed and continued, there is a possibility of a larger change in strategy by the Malian regime, which would have repercussions on the AES more broadly.

TRANSITIONS BECOMING PERMANENT

All three AES military regimes have extended their transition timelines and amended their constitutions to consolidate and prolong their rule since taking power. The first coup in the Sahel region took place in August 2020 in Mali with the transitional authorities rapidly establishing [an 18-month transition period with elections planned for February 2022](#). Yet, no elections were held in 2022 and after negotiations with ECOWAS a new 24-months transition period was announced in June with elections to [take place in February 2024](#). Already during the fall of 2023, however, the transitional authorities declared that they would be [delayed because of ‘technical’ reasons](#) linked to the adoption of a new constitution and somewhat ironically the census by a French company. In May 2024, three months beyond the supposed end to the transition, an inter-Malian dialogue recommended a 2 to 5-year long transition period, allowing the [military leader to stay in power until 2029](#), and to stand in elections. In October the same year, Colonel Goïta promoted himself to the highest military rank of the country and [became an army general, while promoting 5 other regime members](#) to the rank of general, symbolically demonstrating their hold on power. While discussions about elections surfaced in the fall of 2024 following the [inclusion of elections in the national budget plan](#), they had disappeared in the beginning of 2025.

In Burkina Faso, Captain Traoré who conducted the second coup in September 2022 initially promised elections in July 2024. Yet already in the fall of 2023, the Burkinabe regime declared that [elections were no priority](#), and a few months later [announced constitutional reforms](#) changing institutions. Elections were indeed not a priority for the regime, which in May 2024 set the transition period to an [astonishing 60 months—allowing Captain Traoré to remain in power until 2029](#). This move, mirroring his counterpart in Mali, effectively cemented his hold on power.

Yet, of the three AES states, Niger’s regime might be the most impressive in terms of withstanding pressure for setting an election date. For over 18 months, the military regime managed to resist calls for an official transition timeline.

Only after a very brief ‘national dialogue’ in February 2025, was a renewable transitional period of [minimum 5 years](#) recommended by the participants of the dialogue. While already a General, the Nigerien junta leader Tchiani followed his Malian homologue’s example and promoted himself to army general at the same time as [he was sworn in as president for a five-year period](#) in March 2025.

The transitions becoming, if not permanent, so at least very long, allow the leaders to develop and more firmly root the establishment of the AES confederation in the region. New leaders, and especially democratically elected leaders, might not have been as keen to continue the AES project and the exit from ECOWAS, due to both the economic cost and political consequences for the region. Yet, with a guaranteed 5-year period in power and the possibility to be ‘re-elected’, the current military regimes will be able to secure new partnerships between AES and regional and international partners - evidenced by the [recent declaration by Russia to support the new joint AES force](#) - thereby ensuring the survival of the alliance for at least the medium-term. The EU and its member states must therefore consider this new reality of military leaders remaining in power in their (re) engagement strategies.

AN AUTHORITARIAN TURN: IF YOU DON’T CONTROL THE TERRITORY, CONTROL THE INFORMATION SPACE

In lieu of territorial control, the military authorities in the three states have taken an authoritarian turn to control the information space. Since the coups in the three states, independent and foreign media sites have been suspended or banned with foreign journalists expelled. Local journalists have faced increased oppression and risked arbitrary arrests, while civil society groups and political parties have faced repression or been suspended.

Since taking power in Mali 2020, Goïta’s government has progressively restricted free speech and restrained human rights. [In 2022 the military authorities banned Radio France International \(RFI\) and France 24](#) and later the same year it also temporarily suspended the [local station](#)

[Joliba TV News](#) for defamatory content. Two years later in November 2024, following complaints from the Burkinabe Haute Autorité de la Communication about a debate program mentioning a potential staged coup attempt in Burkina, Mali’s national communications regulator [withdrew the private channel’s license](#), demonstrating that the regimes in the AES countries collaborate in their attempts at controlling independent media.

Between 2022 and 2024, individuals, groups and parties who were critical of the transitional government [faced harassment and arbitrary arrests](#). A high profile example was the expulsion of [the UN’s human rights chief in February](#) 2023, before the ousting of MINUSMA as a whole. At the end of 2023 and beginning of 2024, a number of civil society organizations were closed in what the UN declared to be part of a [worrying trend of increasing restrictions on human rights](#) and fundamental freedoms. Also in 2024, the Malian regime [suspended activities by political parties](#) for three months and banned media from reporting about them, further entrenching the shift to authoritarianism.

In Burkina Faso, Captain Traoré took similar measures following his coup in 2022 and [ousted two foreign journalists](#) with no official reason, while later imitating neighbouring Mali’s move and banning [RFI and France 24](#). In addition the French news outlet Jeune Afrique was suspended for seeking to [‘discredit’ the military](#), while in 2024 the [French TV5 was suspended](#) for broadcasting an interview with a former election commission president and critic of the junta. Since the beginning of 2025, a new wave of crack downs on media and critics of the regime has taken place, with (exiled) journalists and activists being [placed on terrorist lists](#) to intimidate them and constrain their work. Also in March 2025, three journalists were abducted and reappeared 10 days later in an online video in military attire, [stating that they were ‘covering the reality’](#) on the ground: another example of forced conscription.

The Niger regime followed its neighbours’ example only a week after it had taken power in the coup and indefinitely [suspended RFI and France 24](#). Since then, multiple suspensions of independent local and international media

organizations have followed with journalists working on security related issues [intimidated and arbitrarily arrested](#). More broadly, human rights organisations have [documented arbitrary detentions](#) – including the former President Mohamed Bazoum and seven cabinet members - enforced disappearances and violations of the right to a fair trial and press freedom. Since the coup in July 2023, the ruling regime has [also suspended the activities of political parties](#), effectively muzzling any formal opposition.

A stricter control of foreigners arriving in all three states have also been put in place. Since October 2024, the authorities retain international passports upon arrival at Niamey International Airport with holders asked to collect it days later, yet in some cases not until the day of departure, while getting research permits have been more difficult for certain nationalities. This practice allows the authorities to maintain a leverage over external actors and limiting their mobility while in the country.

The three regimes have thus taken authoritarian turns to maintain control of the information space and civil society's activities. This way they can select and control the news that the population receives and maintain a discourse of authority and control, despite an often-contrasting empirical situation. The Burkina Faso transitional authorities claimed for example that the state armed forces controlled [70% of the territory in October 2024](#), almost the same figure that external research organisations attributed [to jihadist control](#), making it increasingly difficult for the population to get an accurate picture of the factual security situation.

CONCLUSION

The Sahel region has been increasingly absent from media coverage during the past year, due to competing crises around the globe stealing the spotlight, but also to mounting oppression of independent media in the three AES states, and a declining interest from Western domestic populations after their forced withdrawal from the region. Yet, as this article has demonstrated, the silence characterizing the Sahel does not equal security and stability, on the contrary.

All the crises which motivated Europe and other Western states' involvement in the Sahel region are still there, and they are worsening. The jihadist expansion is accelerating and the food insecurity is increasing, with an estimated [52.7 million people projected to experience acute hunger](#) between June and August 2025 in West Africa, while the number of internally displaced persons continue to break new records with over [3.1 million](#) across Burkina Faso, Niger, Mali and Chad in March 2025.

The Sahel may no longer be the strategic priority it once was for the EU given other competing priorities, yet it would be an error for European policy makers to assume that the worsening crises in the region are not likely to influence the European continent in the medium to long term. Moreover, a disengagement from the Sahel does not only imply disengagement from the authorities of the countries, but also from the populations. As the EU reflects on its new approach to the Sahel with a welcomed toned-down French participation, timid steps to (re)engagement with the AES states have been taken with the new EU Special Representative in the lead. Yet, before the EU takes larger steps to re-engaging, it needs to recalibrate its interests and priorities in a region which now has a range of new partners: what does it want to do, what can it do, and with whom?

What remains already clear however, is that in an increasingly polarized world, connectivity, knowledge exchange and solidarity between different continents, regions and countries are desperately needed to address the current global challenges.

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